

Gaman

An adaptation of a true story

By Dick Steele

Copyright© 2024 Dick Steele

All rights reserved

Most characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious.

Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is largely coincidental

And not intended by the author.

No part of this book may be reproduced or stored in a retrieval system,

or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,

photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of publisher.

ISBN: 9798301360435

Cover design by CP Smit

To Trevor Smit – Mr. Reliable

My soul is a broken field, ploughed by pain

-Sara Teasdale-

Gaman	1
Introduction.....	7
Preface	8
PROLOGUE.....	10
Part 1	13
CHAPTER 1	13
CHAPTER 2	22
CHAPTER 3	28
CHAPTER 4	31
CHAPTER 5	38
CHAPTER 6	45
CHAPTER 7	52
CHAPTER 8	56
CHAPTER 9	60
CHAPTER 10	66
CHAPTER 11	72
CHAPTER 12	79
CHAPTER 13	87
CHAPTER 14	89
CHAPTER 15	93
CHAPTER 16	101
CHAPTER 17	106
CHAPTER 18	114
CHAPTER 19	119
CHAPTER 20	124
CHAPTER 21	129
CHAPTER 22	132
CHAPTER 23	136
CHAPTER 24	144
CHAPTER 25	148
CHAPTER 26	154
Part 2.....	158
CHAPTER 27	158
CHAPTER 28	173
CHAPTER 29	182
CHAPTER 30	189

CHAPTER 31	195
CHAPTER 32	199
CHAPTER 33	203
CHAPTER 34	206
CHAPTER 35	212
CHAPTER 36	216
CHAPTER 37	225
CHAPTER 38	229
CHAPTER 39	234
CHAPTER 40	242
CHAPTER 41	248
CHAPTER 42	253
CHAPTER 43	260
CHAPTER 44	266
CHAPTER 45	277
CHAPTER 46	288
CHAPTER 47	307
CHAPTER 48	316
CHAPTER 49	321
CHAPTER 50	329
CHAPTER 51	340
EPILOGUE.....	346
Glossary	352

Introduction

Sayuri, a high school student in Tokyo, navigates a world of relentless bullying, familial financial strain, and the allure of escape. As she seeks solace in her studies and dreams of a brighter future, the weight of her family's debt and the constant torment from her classmate, Tomoko, threaten to crush her spirit.

When a chance encounter with a high-ranking yakuza member presents a solution to her family's financial woes, Sayuri finds herself drawn into a dangerous and secretive underworld, where loyalty, betrayal, and the complexities of human connection collide.

As she becomes entangled in the yakuza's intricate web, Sayuri must confront her own vulnerabilities and the consequences of her choices, ultimately embarking on a journey of self-discovery and resilience that will forever shape her destiny.

Preface

In a world often marked by uncertainty and challenges, the concept of gaman—a Japanese term meaning to endure with dignity and patience—resonates deeply. This book, *Gaman*, is a heartfelt exploration of resilience, identity, and the strength of the human spirit.

The inspiration for this story emerged from the true-life experiences of an individual who I know personally. She has faced adversity through her own personal struggles, societal pressures and complex relationships. Through the lens of my characters, I aim to illuminate the ways in which we navigate hardships, and how these journeys shape us into who we are meant to become.

As you delve into the pages of *Gaman*, you will encounter characters who, despite their vulnerabilities, exhibit remarkable strength. Their stories unfold in a landscape that mirrors their internal conflicts—a place where hope and despair coexist, and where moments of beauty emerge from the most trying circumstances.

This book is not just a narrative; it is an invitation to reflect on our own lives and the ways in which we cope with challenges. Each character's journey serves as a reminder that while pain and struggle are universal, so too is the capacity for perseverance and growth.

I hope that as you read *Gaman*, you find echoes of your own experiences, and that you are inspired to embrace the resilience within yourself. May this story serve as a testament to the power of enduring with grace, and the transformative nature of hope.

Thank you for joining me on this journey.

-Dick Steele-

Gaman

Pronunciation: /gä`män/

Part of Speech: Noun

Definition:

1. (Japanese) The enduring of difficult circumstances with patience and dignity; a cultural concept emphasizing perseverance and self-restraint in the face of adversity.

Usage:

- "In times of hardship, many people find strength through gaman, embracing challenges with resolve."

Origin:

- Borrowed from Japanese, where it signifies a deeply ingrained cultural value of resilience and fortitude.

Example Sentence:

- "Her ability to remain calm and composed during the crisis was a true expression of gaman."

PROLOGUE

Tokyo

Winter, 1990

The classroom buzzed with the energy of students preparing for the day ahead. Winter sunlight streamed through the large windows, casting warm, golden rays on the rows of desks. Sayuri sat in the front, her neatly pressed uniform—a navy blazer and a white blouse—paired with a skirt that fell just below her knees. She often chose her clothing carefully, aware of the subtle differences that set her apart from the more fashionable girls in her class.

With her long, dark hair pulled back into a tidy ponytail, Sayuri focused intently on her notebook, the pages filled with careful notes from the previous lesson. Around her, laughter and chatter filled the air, but she maintained her quiet demeanour, finding solace in the rhythm of her pencil gliding across the page.

"Sayuri, are you even listening?" called out Haruka, a girl seated behind her. Her voice was playful, laced with camaraderie.

Sayuri glanced up, the corners of her eyes glistening, a faint blush creeping onto her cheeks. "Yes, I'm just... taking notes," she replied softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Good! You're always so serious," Haruka teased, but her tone was affectionate. Sayuri smiled shyly, grateful for the small moment of connection. She wasn't really friends with Haruka, but that was not Haruka's fault. She had always been polite and friendly towards Sayuri. It was just that Sayuri always felt that the other students were more special than herself. Except for Tomoko. She hated Tomoko.

She lifted her notebook slightly with one hand and slid out the note Tomoko had left inside her school bag that morning while she had been sweeping the classroom.

You are so dasai. Do you think because you get better grades than us that you are special? You ARE NOT! You are just a poor little girl with no friends. Watch your back. Anything might happen. Accidentally, of course. I'm just worried about you. NOT!!

As the bell rang, signalling the end of class, Sayuri packed her things methodically, ensuring everything was in order. She took a deep breath, steeling herself for the walk home. The bustling hallways and crowded streets often felt overwhelming and she doubted that she would ever get accustomed to it.

Three more years. You can do this! There were less than four months to go until she finished middle school. Then three years of high school. The thought of another three years filled her with dread.

The sun was low in the sky as students poured out of the school, their voices echoing in the afternoon air. Sayuri walked with her head slightly bowed, her brown eyes focused on the ground, hoping to avoid confrontation. Just as she reached the school gate, she felt a familiar tension in the air.

“Look who it is!” came a sharp voice from behind her. It was Tomoko, flanked by her usual entourage of giggling friends. Sayuri’s heart sank. “Sayuri!” Tomoko called, her tone dripping with mockery. “Nice skirt! Are you trying to hide your legs? It’s so... modest!”

Sayuri tightened her grip on her *randoseru* straps, her cheeks flushing. She pressed her lips together, trying to ignore the taunts.

“Honestly, you’ll never find a boyfriend dressing like that. You’re way too plain and boring,” Tomoko continued, her laughter ringing out like a bell. The girls around her joined in, their giggles a sharp contrast to Sayuri’s quiet demeanour. “Just look at how you dress! It’s like you’re trying to be invisible!” Tomoko added, stepping closer, her eyes sparkling with cruel amusement.

Sayuri felt the heat rise in her face, shame creeping in as she fought back the urge to retaliate or even respond. She had heard these words before, but each time they stung just as much. Instead of engaging, she kept her gaze fixed ahead, hoping to walk past them unnoticed.

“Aw, don’t be like that, Sayuri! We’re just trying to help you!” Tomoko said, feigning innocence. “You know, if you wore something a little shorter, maybe you’d actually get noticed.”

Sayuri’s pulse quickened, a mix of anger and hurt swelling within her. She wanted to scream, to tell Tomoko that she was happy with who she was, but the words lodged in her throat. Instead, she quickened her pace, trying to put distance between herself and the group.

“Run away, Sayuri! You can’t hide forever!” Tomoko shouted after her, laughter trailing behind like a dark cloud.

Sayuri reached the park on the way home, a small sanctuary where she often sought refuge. The trees swayed gently in the breeze, their leaves whispering secrets she wished she could hear. She found a bench and sat down, her heart still pounding from the encounter. Pulling out her notebook, she began to write, pouring her feelings onto the page as a way to cope. The ink flowed freely, each word a release of the pent-up emotions she struggled to express.

Why do I let them get to me? she wrote. “Why can’t I just be confident like everyone else?”

As she scribbled, she recalled the moments in class when Haruka would smile at her, the brief exchanges that brought her warmth. Those small bits of kindness reminded her that not everyone shared Tomoko's perspective. But the lingering words echoed in her mind: "Too plain, too boring." She sighed, closing her notebook, feeling the weight of her low self-esteem settle heavily on her shoulders.

Just then, a small dog trotted by, playfully tugging at its owner's leash. Sayuri watched as the dog leaped and bounded, its tail wagging furiously. There was a freedom in its movements, a joy that momentarily lifted her spirits.

"Hello *koinu*! Maybe I need to be more like you," she mused aloud, a faint smile breaking through her frown. "More carefree."

As the hazy sun dipped lower, casting long shadows, Sayuri realized that while she might not fit into the mould Tomoko and her friends had created, she was still worthy of love and friendship. She just needed to find her own way to shine, even if it meant embracing her uniqueness. *Gaman*, she thought. *That's all it is.*

With renewed determination, Sayuri stood up, brushed off her skirt, and prepared to head home. She may not have the popularity or the confidence of others, but she had her kindness, her intelligence, and a heart that sought to grow. And perhaps, one day, that would be enough.

Part 1

CHAPTER 1

Diffused rays of sunlight filtered through the sheer curtains, casting a warm glow across Sayuri's room. Posters of her favourite bands plastered the walls, and her small desk was cluttered with textbooks and notes. On her bed, Sayuri sat cross-legged, fidgeting with a pencil as she recounted her day to her best friend, Aya, who lounged on the floor, sipping a can of soda.

"...and then Tomoko said something me being plain and boring," Sayuri sighed, frustration etched on her face. "I just want to focus on school, you know? If I can get into a good university, maybe I can find a way to pay for it. But they never let up!"

Aya nodded sympathetically, her dark eyes reflecting understanding. "That's so unfair, Sayuri. They have no idea what you're dealing with. You're doing the best you can."

Sayuri's shoulders slumped, the weight of Tomoko's taunts heavy on her heart. "I just wish they'd leave me alone. It's like they get a kick out of making me miserable."

Aya sat up, her expression shifting from sympathy to determination. "She's just an insecure little girl trying to feel important. If you ignore her, she will eventually give up. Their reward is seeing you miserable. It gives them power and a reason to continue bullying you."

"I know that, but they know which buttons to push. I hate being poor. They are always teasing me about that. I just want to punch her sometimes, but I know I will be the one punished for that. Not her."

"You know what? We should do something about it. This weekend, let's sneak out and explore the nightlife in Shibuya. There's this new club that everyone's talking about! It'll be fun!"

Sayuri's eyes widened with a mix of excitement and apprehension. "But... sneaking out? What if we get caught?"

Aya waved her hand dismissively. "I've snuck out before with Hana. We found some great places to hang out. But ever since... you know, since she died, I haven't had the courage to sneak out again. I miss just being out, feeling alive." Her voice softened, the weight of loss hanging in the air.

Sayuri felt a pang of guilt. She knew how much Aya had struggled since Hana's death. "I'm sorry, Aya. I wish I could've helped her."

"It's not your fault," Aya said quickly, her tone reassuring. "But that's why I think we should do this. It'll be good for us. You need a break from all the stress, and I need to feel free again."

Sayuri bit her lip, contemplating the idea. "I mean... I really want to go, but my parents... They're strict. They'd never let me out at night."

Aya nodded, her mind racing. “What if we come up with a story? You could tell them you’re going to a temple with me. We can say you’re sleeping over at my place afterward. My mom trusts me, and my dad is never home.”

The suggestion hung in the air, tempting yet daunting. Sayuri glanced out the window, where the sky was turning a deep indigo. “I don’t know, Aya. I’ve never lied to my parents like that.”

“I get it. But think about it—just one night of freedom. You deserve to have some fun! We can dance, laugh, be ourselves without worrying about school or Tomoko.” Aya’s excitement was infectious, and Sayuri felt her resolve waver.

“Okay,” Sayuri said slowly, her heart racing at the thought. “I’m sure. Let’s do it. But we need a solid plan.”

Aya grinned, her enthusiasm bubbling over. “Alright! So, here’s what we’ll do - you tell your parents that you’re going to a temple, and I’ll make sure my mom knows you’ll be at my place. We’ll go to the closest temple and buy some *omikuji* to prove that we were there, and then we can come back to my house, get changed and head to Shibuya!”

Sayuri couldn’t help but smile at Aya’s energy. “What if they ask where we’ll be? Or what time we’ll be back?”

“I’ll handle it. I’ll say we’ll be back late—after midnight. They don’t need to know every detail.” Aya’s confidence reassured Sayuri, who felt a flutter of excitement mixed with nerves.

“Okay, I trust you,” Sayuri said, her voice steadier now. “But we have to be careful. I can’t let them find out. Can I wear some of your clothes please? It will look suspicious if I pack too many clothes just for a temple and a sleepover.”

“Of course! We’ll be super stealthy. Just think of the music, the lights... It’ll be amazing!” Aya’s eyes sparkled with anticipation.

As they plotted their adventure, Sayuri felt a rush of adrenaline. For the first time in weeks, she was looking forward to something beyond grades and Tomoko’s taunts. Maybe, just maybe, this night out could be the escape she needed.

The air in Sayuri’s house was thick with the smell of simmering soup, but a tension hung over the kitchen as her mother bustled about, glancing at the clock. Sayuri had claimed she was going to the temple with Aya, but something felt off. The way Sayuri had been acting lately—more secretive and a little too eager—raised her mother’s suspicions.

“Sayuri,” her mother called, wiping her hands on a dish towel. “What time will you be home?”

“Um, I think I will sleep over at Aya’s house. We have a school project to work on,” Sayuri replied, trying to sound casual.

“I didn’t know that you had an interest in temples?” her mother quizzed, her brow furrowed.

Sayuri's heart skipped a beat; she could sense her mother's unease. "Aya is my only friend and she wants to go pay her respects. But I think she really is praying for a boyfriend," Sayuri said, trying to lighten the mood and hopefully allay her mother's suspicions.

Her mother turned to look at her Sayuri, studying her face, looking for the tell-tale signs of lying, as all parents know their kids do. She was once a teenager too. She knew all the tricks. *Sayuri is 15 now. I should start treating her as an adult. I know she has a pure heart. I am going to trust her this time,* she thought. "Ok, I hope you do well on your project. Don't stay up too late. Teenagers need lots of sleep so that they grow properly."

"You say the weirdest things, mom," Sayuri smiled coyly, inwardly wanting to scream with joy at the prospect of going out on the town with Aya. "Thank you for your permission."

The landline rang. Aya's sister, Mariko, answered, her voice bright and cheerful. "Hello?"

"Hi Mariko, this is Yoko - Sayuri's mother. May I speak with Sayuri please?"

"Oh, she just got back from the temple with Aya," her sister replied, oblivious to the tension brewing in the air. "They're in her room."

"What? They're back already?" Sayuri's mother felt her heart drop. "Thank you. Never mind, it's not important. Thank you. Goodnight."

Without waiting for another word, she hung up, quickly went to Sayuri's bedroom, then rushed out the door, her mind racing. She lived just a block away from Aya, and the winter chill bit at her as she hurried down the street.

What are you doing, Yoko, she scolded herself. *You are supposed to trust Sayuri.* But her motherly instincts were too strong. She worried about Sayuri more than her two older daughters. Keiko, who was in her first year of high school, was a happy child. She got good grades, was a member of the school marching band (she played the snare drum) and had lots of friends. Atsuko, the eldest, was in her final year of high school. Atsuko was a bit more complex than Keiko. She was a brilliant student and a great athlete, but she was easily angered and prone to sulking.

Sayuri was different. She was a sensitive child, but with a huge heart. Sayuri's lack of confidence made her a bit of a loner. Aya was her only friend. She shied away from extra-curricular activities and anything that led to her spending more time at school than necessary.

Aya and Sayuri were in Aya's bedroom, the atmosphere electric with excitement. Their quick trip to the temple to get some *omikuji* complete, they were now busy with phase two of their grand plan - dressing up for their night out. Sayuri and Aya were of similar size, and Sayuri, after many wardrobe changes, had finally settled on a sparkling top, fitted jeans, and just the right amount of makeup. They were laughing, lost in their own world, when a loud knock interrupted them. There was someone at the front door.

"Aya! Please see who's at the door!" Aya's mother shouted, "I'm busy cooking!"

“Uh-oh,” Aya whispered, wide-eyed. “What do we do?”

Before they could even think of a plan, there came another shout, “Aya! Did you hear me? There’s someone at the door! Please get it!”

“OK mom! I’m coming!” Aya hurried out the bedroom and went to the front door, not wanting to disobey her mother.

“Konbanwa,” Sayuri’s mother greeted Aya as she opened the door.

“Okaasan, konbanwa. Come inside please.”

Yoko Ichikawa stepped into the entrance hall of the cosy house, smiling in gratitude to Aya as she did so. “Akiko San, konbanwa. Thank you for inviting me into your house.”

“Don’t be silly, Yoko, I’ve lived on the same block as you for 20 years. Come in, come in. Tea?”

“No, thanks. I’m not staying. I just brought some warm pyjamas for Sayuri. It’s a cold night tonight.”

“Oh, OK. She’s in Aya’s room. Go ahead.”

“Thank you. I won’t be a minute. I don’t want to disturb your dinner time.”

“No, not at all. No bother.”

The door swung open, and Sayuri’s mother stepped in, a warm smile on her face. Sayuri stood in front of the mirror, adjusting her bedazzled top and smoothing down her tight jeans. The room was filled with the scent of makeup, the atmosphere shifting the moment Sayuri’s mother entered.

“Sayuri, you got all dressed up to go to the temple?” her mother asked, raising an eyebrow as she placed a pair of warm pyjamas on Aya’s bed.

Sayuri’s heart raced. She didn’t want to lie, but the truth felt like a ticking time bomb. She looked down, the sparkles of her top glimmering mockingly in the soft light. Aya stood to one side, her hands fidgeting nervously. She hoped Sayuri could find a way to talk her way out of this. “Um, we were just... trying on different outfits to see which ones we like the best,” Sayuri mumbled, the words feeling weak even as they left her lips.

“Are you lying to me, Sayuri-chan?” her mother pressed, the warmth of her smile fading. “Are you planning on going out?”

Sayuri felt the weight of her mother’s gaze, the love and disappointment mingling in the air. “No, I just...” she started, but the words caught in her throat.

“Sayuri,” her mother said softly, stepping closer. “You can tell me the truth. I won’t be angry if you just explain.”

“I... I wanted to feel good for once,” Sayuri admitted quietly, her voice barely above a whisper. “Everyone else gets to have fun, and I just wanted to escape for a night.”

Aya's heart sank as she saw the hurt in Sayuri's eyes, the desperation that lay beneath. She wanted to reach out, to support her friend, but she felt frozen in place, caught between her own fear and the urge to protect Sayuri.

"Escape?" her mother echoed, confusion etching deeper lines on her face. "Escape from what?"

"From the pressure, from school, from Tomoko and her friends—everything," Sayuri confessed, her voice trembling now. "I thought if I could just go out, even for a little while, I could forget about it all."

Sayuri's mother's expression softened, but she still looked concerned. "Sayuri, I understand that you're feeling overwhelmed, but sneaking out isn't the answer. You need to talk to us, not hide."

Sayuri felt tears pricking at her eyes. "I didn't want to disappoint you."

"Disappointment comes from dishonesty, Sayuri," her mother said gently. "I want you to feel free to come to me with anything. You're my daughter, and I care about you."

"I'm sorry," Sayuri whispered, guilt washing over her. She couldn't meet her mother's eyes anymore. "I just... I wanted to have fun, even if it was just for one night."

Aya could feel the tension in the room, the weight of unspoken words. She stepped forward slightly, her voice soft. "Maybe we can find another way to have fun, Sayuri. We don't have to sneak out to enjoy ourselves."

Sayuri looked at Aya, searching for support, but her mother's eyes were still on her, searching for answers. "But I wanted to dance, to feel alive for just a moment," Sayuri said, frustration creeping back into her voice.

"Dancing, feeling alive—these aren't bad desires," her mother replied, her tone firm yet understanding. "But you must do so safely, honestly, and without risking your safety or our trust."

"I know," Sayuri said, her voice cracking. "I'm sorry. I just thought... maybe if I dressed up, I could forget everything for a little while."

Her mother nodded, a hint of sadness in her eyes. "You don't need to dress up or sneak out to be special, Sayuri. You are special just as you are."

The weight of the moment hung between them, the silence stretching as both girls absorbed the gravity of Sayuri's words.

"Now, let's get back to reality," Sayuri's mother said, breaking the tension. "How about we all have a cozy movie night instead? Back at home. Pyjamas included."

Sayuri looked at her mother, then at Aya, feeling the warmth of their concern enveloping her like a comforting blanket. Maybe tonight wouldn't be what she had envisioned, but perhaps it could still be something good.

"Okay," Sayuri finally said, a small smile breaking through her earlier sorrow. "I'd like that. Can Aya come?"

“Yes, of course. But I still have to tell your father about this,” her mother said gently. And you’re grounded.”

“Grounded?” Sayuri’s voice trembled. “But I—”

“No buts! And you,” she turned to Aya, “you should know better than to encourage this kind of behaviour.”

Sayuri felt crushed as she watched her mother’s disappointment. “I just wanted to forget about everything for one night...”

“Sumimasen Okaasan. I think I should stay at home tonight. You two probably have a lot to discuss.”

“Yes, we do. Thank you for understanding.”

Sayuri’s mouth opened instinctively in protest of having to face her parents alone, but no words came out.

The walk back home was heavy with silence. Sayuri’s mother finally spoke, her voice low and stern. “I can’t believe you would lie to me. Do you have any idea how serious this is?”

“I was just trying to have a life, Mom! Everyone else gets to have fun!” Sayuri retorted, her frustration bubbling over.

“Everyone else? Is that what you think? You’re not everyone else; you’re my daughter! You have responsibilities!”

They reached home, and Sayuri’s father was sitting at the dining table, papers spread out before him, an array of empty beer bottles in the centre of the table. Her mother laid it all out, recounting Sayuri’s deception with an inside voice.

“This is unacceptable, Sayuri,” her father said, looking up with stern eyes. “You need to understand the consequences of your actions. This is not about going out. This is about lying to your parents.”

“I didn’t mean for it to get this far,” Sayuri murmured, tears pricking at her eyes.

“You’re grounded for a month,” her mother declared. “No going out, nothing until I can trust you again. Go to your room.”

Sayuri felt deflated. She had so been looking forward to having a fun night with Aya. She definitely needed some release from the tension she constantly felt.

Well, it’s official. My life sucks! she thought as she shuffled towards her room.

Lying on her bed, holding her pillow close to her chest, she could hear the raised voices of her parents disagreeing on how to handle the situation, Sayuri felt a sense of loss wash over her. The night she had longed for, the escape she had envisioned, was slipping away, leaving only the weight of her parents’ disappointment. In that moment, she realized that the walls she had tried to break down were now closing in tighter than ever.

She lay staring at the ceiling, her mind a chaotic swirl of frustration and disappointment. The dim light from her bedside lamp cast a soft glow on her walls, covered in posters of bands and dreams she felt miles away from reaching. The door to her room was slightly ajar, and she could hear the muffled sounds of her parents arguing in the living room.

“My days are long, Tsuma-chan!” her father’s voice boomed, resonating through the thin walls of their small house. “When I come home, I want to relax. All day long my manager is “Ichikawa this...” and “Ichikawa that...” Always shouting! And the worst thing is that he has no life! He arrives early and leaves late and expects all of us to stay at the office until he leaves. I’m so tired of my job. I just want peace and quiet! OK! Can I have that?”

Sayuri clenched her fists, feeling a mix of sympathy and annoyance. She wanted to escape the noise, to drown out the reality of her family’s struggles.

Her mother’s voice cut through her thoughts, calm yet firm. “Danna-San, I am grateful that you work so hard to support our family. I really am. But I hardly see you, and when I do see you, all you do is drink and complain about work. I just wish that we could spend more time together as a family. The girls will start leaving home in the next few years. Let’s make an effort to spend some quality time together.”

“When do you expect me to do that?” Takeshi shot back, the frustration in his voice palpable. “I’m tired all the time. I just want to sleep on weekends!”

“Sleep? You don’t ever go to sleep!” Yoko retorted, her tone rising. “All you do is come home and drink until you pass out! I’m also tired! Tired of your drinking and moaning! Who do you think helps you to the bedroom every night? Me! That’s who!”

Sayuri felt her heart race as the argument escalated. She wished she could block it all out, but every word pierced through her, amplifying her own feelings of helplessness.

“Why do you always bring up my drinking?” Takeshi’s voice thundered, filled with indignation. “I don’t beat you, woman! I am not a violent person! I just need to destress when I get home. Can’t you understand that? How can I destress when you are always complaining about my drinking? Just leave me alone!” he continued, his voice softer but still firm. Sayuri’s heart plummeted. She hadn’t realized how much her father was struggling.

“I just want us to discuss Sayuri. It’s our duty as parents to make sure she is safe and happy. I think things are not easy for her,” Yoko replied, her voice tinged with frustration. “She’s struggling, too. But sneaking out behind my back only makes it worse. She needs guidance, not a father who drinks away his problems!”

Sayuri felt tears prick at her eyes, a mix of anger and despair coursing through her. She didn’t want to be the cause of their fights. She just wanted to find her own way, to feel like she belonged somewhere, even if that was in the chaos of the nightlife she had so desperately craved.

“I’m doing my best!” Takeshi shouted, the stress of his day spilling over. “I’m trying to provide for this family! And what do I get? Complaints! I can’t win!”

Sayuri’s heart raced as she listened to the chaos. She wanted to block it all out, but then her father’s next words pierced through her haze.

“And the last thing I need is drama. If Sayuri-chan had come to me to ask permission to go out with Aya, I probably would have said yes. She needs to destress too. Don’t be so hard on her.”

At that moment, anger surged within Sayuri. She couldn’t believe he was using her as an excuse to deflect his own issues. It felt unfair and suffocating.

“Dad!” she called out, her voice shaky. She pushed herself off the bed and stood up, ready to confront the storm brewing outside her door.

The arguing stopped abruptly, and silence fell like a thick blanket. Sayuri stepped into the hallway, her heart pounding as she braced herself for the confrontation.

“You say I need to destress, but do you ever stop and think why I am so stressed?” she challenged, her voice stronger than she felt.

Her parents exchanged glances; surprise etched on their faces. Takeshi swallowed, his expression shifting from anger to concern.

“Sayuri, we didn’t—”

“No, you didn’t. You’re so caught up in your own problems that you don’t even see what’s happening with me!” She felt tears welling up, but she fought them back. “I am having a hard time at school and then, when I come home, I have to listen to you two arguing all the time! I just wanted to have one night of fun, and now look where we are!”

“Sweetheart, we’re just trying to manage everything,” Yoko said softly, stepping closer. “I know it’s hard for you, too.”

Sayuri shook her head, frustration spilling over. “But you both just keep fighting! I feel like I’m in the middle of a storm. I just wanted to feel normal for once!”

The silence hung heavy again, each of them feeling the weight of the moment. Takeshi took a deep breath, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly. Yoko nodded, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

“You’re right, Sayuri. We need to be there for each other. We’re a family, after all,” Yoko said.

Sayuri looked between her parents, a flicker of hope igniting inside her.

“Can we start now? Can we just... talk? No shouting?” pleaded Sayuri.

Takeshi and Yoko exchanged glances, and slowly, they both nodded. “Okay,” Takeshi said, his voice softer. “Let’s try that.”

Her father sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I didn’t realize it was bothering you so much,” he admitted, looking genuinely remorseful.

“Neither did I,” her mother added softly. “I’m sorry, Sayuri. We’ll try to do better.”

“Let’s make an effort to talk nicely to each other from now on,” her father suggested, glancing at her mother for support.

Sayuri nodded, relief washing over her. “That would mean a lot to me.”

With a newfound sense of commitment, the three of them moved into the lounge. They settled onto the couch, the atmosphere still a bit stiff but gradually easing as they attempted to shift gears.

“So, what’s been going on with everyone?” her mother asked, breaking the silence with a gentle smile.

Sayuri took a deep breath, feeling the tension begin to dissipate. “Well, I’ve been working on my project for school. It’s about sustainable living, and I think it could really make a difference.”

Her father nodded, leaning in. “That sounds interesting. What kind of ideas do you have?”

As they chatted about school, hobbies, and even silly anecdotes from their day, Sayuri felt the warmth of familial connection begin to blossom again. They laughed about small things, shared stories, and for the first time in weeks, the air felt lighter.

After a while, Sayuri stood up, feeling a sense of contentment she hadn’t had in a long time. “I think I’m going to head to my room. I want to read for a bit and then sleep,” she said, a smile lingering on her lips.

“Goodnight, Sayuri,” her parents called in unison, their voices softened by the recent bonding.

“Goodnight. Thank you for listening to me,” Sayuri said earnestly.

Once in her room, she sat on her bed, reflecting on the evening. It felt good to have spoken up, to have been heard. Just then, the door creaked open, and Keiko peeked in, her wide eyes searching for confirmation. “Hey, can I come in?”

“Of course,” Sayuri replied, a smile breaking across her face.

Keiko entered, plopping down beside her. “I heard some noise earlier. Are Mom and Dad okay?”

“They’re trying to work things out,” Sayuri said, feeling hopeful. “We had a nice talk just now. I think it’ll be better from here on out.”

Keiko grinned; her relief palpable. “That’s good to hear. I hate it when they argue. It makes everything feel so... heavy.”

“Exactly,” Sayuri agreed, feeling the weight lift off her shoulders. “But I think we’ll be okay. We just need to keep communicating.”

As they sat together, the bond between the sisters felt stronger than ever, a reminder that even in the midst of chaos, there was always room for understanding and love.

“Let’s cuddle,” Keiko suggested, putting one arm around Sayuri’s waist. “It will be alright Sayuri-chan. In a few years, you me and Atsuko will be living in our own apartment and laughing about this. It will pass. Gaman.”

“Thank you, ne-chan. I love you. You are my favourite sister. Don’t tell Atsuko that I said that,” she said with a soft giggle.

CHAPTER 2

The soft light of morning filtered through the curtains as Sayuri stirred awake, her mind still hazy from sleep. It was around 7:15 AM, and a sense of calm washed over her. After last night's heartfelt conversation with her parents, she felt a newfound confidence. Maybe they could navigate their struggles together.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed, the cold air hitting her skin like a gentle reminder of winter's chill. With determination, she headed to the bathroom for a cold shower. The icy water shocked her awake, but she welcomed it, thinking about how her father worked so hard to support the family. Every little energy-saving action mattered, even if it meant sacrificing a little comfort. After her shower, she brushed her teeth, the minty freshness invigorating her. Sayuri dressed in warm layers—a thick sweater and snug leggings—before making her way to the kitchen, the comforting aroma of miso soup wafting through the air.

"Good morning, Sayuri!" her mother, Yoko, greeted her with a smile, her hands skilfully stirring the soup. The warmth of their exchange felt soothing, a stark contrast to the tension of the previous days.

"Morning, Mom!" Sayuri replied, returning the smile. She noticed her mother's hair was slightly dishevelled, a sign of her busy morning routine.

Yoko paused, glancing at Sayuri's damp hair. "Why is your hair wet?" she asked, concern flickering in her eyes.

"Oh, my hair dryer isn't working," Sayuri lied, shrugging it off as she poured herself a cup of tea. She didn't want to burden her mother with the financial pressures weighing on her father.

"Is that so? I'll have to look at it later," Yoko said, nodding thoughtfully.

Just then, her older sisters, Atsuko and Keiko, shuffled into the kitchen, their eyes still heavy with sleep.

"Good morning!" Sayuri greeted them cheerfully.

"Morning," they mumbled in unison, rubbing their eyes as they sat at the table.

"Did you see the snow outside?" Keiko asked, yawning. "It looks so pretty!"

Yoko smiled, ladling soup into bowls. "Yes, it does. Perfect for a winter day. Just be careful when you go outside. It might be slippery."

Atsuko nodded, her gaze drifting to the window. "I hope it doesn't get too cold. I don't want to walk to school in this weather. I hope it stops before Monday."

"Just think of it as an adventure!" Sayuri teased, trying to lighten the mood. "You can slip and slide your way there."

They all laughed, the tension of the past few days fading as they shared light-hearted banter. The kitchen felt warm and inviting, a comforting space where they could come together as a family. As they waited for their father to join them, Sayuri felt a sense of

belonging wash over her. Maybe things were starting to change for the better. She glanced at her mother, who was focused on breakfast, and felt grateful for this moment of connection.

“Let’s make sure to enjoy our breakfast together,” Yoko said, arranging the bowls on the table. “It’s the one time we can all be here.”

Sayuri nodded, her heart swelling with appreciation for her family. In that moment, she realized that even small gestures could help bridge the gaps that had formed. Today was a new beginning, and she was ready to embrace it. Just as the atmosphere settled comfortably around the breakfast table, the front door creaked open, and Takeshi stepped into the kitchen, shaking off the cold as he removed his shoes.

“Good morning, everyone!” he called out, his voice warm despite the early hour. “What a chilly day!”

“Morning, Dad!” the girls chimed in unison, their voices a harmonious blend of cheerfulness.

“I didn’t hear you go out the house Danna San. I thought you were still sleeping.”

“I decided that seeing Christmas is around the corner, we should get into the Christmas spirit, so I walked down to the *panya* and got some matcha cookies for the whole family,” he explained as he handed the brown paper bag of cookies to his wife.”

“Arigato Otosan!” they chorused.

Takeshi joined them at the table, his eyes glancing over the spread of miso soup and steaming rice. “Ah, my favourite breakfast. Thank you, Yoko.”

As they began to eat, a comfortable silence enveloped the family. The sound of slurping soup filled the air, mingling with the occasional clatter of chopsticks.

Yet, beneath the surface, an unspoken tension lingered among the sisters, especially since Atsuko had been out on a date the previous night.

Sayuri exchanged knowing glances with Keiko, both of them aware that the family argument was still fresh in their minds. Atsuko, blissfully unaware of the recent drama, continued to enjoy her meal, seemingly in her own world.

After a few moments of silence, Keiko decided to break the ice. “So, Atsuko,” she began, her voice light but with an edge of curiosity, “how was your date last night?”

Atsuko looked up from her bowl, a smile spreading across her face. “It was really nice! We went to that new café in Shibuya. The one with the cute desserts.”

“Oh, I’ve heard about that place!” Sayuri interjected, trying to keep her tone casual. “Did you have a good time?”

“Yeah! He was really sweet, and we talked for hours,” Atsuko replied, her cheeks flushing slightly. “I think he might ask me out again.”

Keiko raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. “Wow, that’s great! What did you guys talk about?”

“Just... everything, really. School, music, our favourite shows,” Atsuko said, her enthusiasm bubbling over. “It felt so easy, you know?”

Sayuri and Keiko exchanged another look, both of them suppressing their thoughts about the family tension. They were happy for Atsuko but couldn't help but feel the weight of the prior night's argument hanging in the air.

Takeshi, sensing the shift in the atmosphere, chimed in. “It's good to hear you're making connections, Atsuko. Just remember to focus on your studies, too.”

“Dad, I can balance both!” Atsuko replied with a playful roll of her eyes.

As the conversation continued, Sayuri felt a tug of guilt. She wanted to share what had happened the night before but decided to wait until after breakfast before asking Keiko if she had told Atsuko about the family argument the night before.

“Did anyone see the weather forecast for Monday?” Keiko asked, trying to steer the conversation back to safer territory.

“No, but it's supposed to snow more this afternoon,” Atsuko replied, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Maybe we can have a snowball fight later!”

Sayuri smiled, grateful for the distraction. “That sounds fun! But let's not forget to help Mom with chores first.”

“Always the responsible one,” Keiko teased, nudging Sayuri playfully.

As they continued their breakfast, Sayuri could feel the warmth of the family wrapping around them, providing a temporary shield against the worries that lay outside. It felt as if the laughter and shared stories slowly began to weave a sense of unity back into their lives.

After breakfast, the kitchen buzzed with the sounds of clattering dishes and flowing water. Sayuri and her sisters gathered around the sink, scrubbing plates and utensils while their mother organized the leftovers.

“Pass me that sponge, please,” Sayuri said, her hands submerged in soapy water.

“Here you go,” Keiko replied, handing over the sponge with a grin. “Teamwork makes the dream work!”

Atsuko giggled as she rinsed off a set of chopsticks. “I can't believe you're so eager to wash dishes. Are you trying to earn brownie points or something?”

“Just trying to be efficient!” Sayuri shot back.

As they worked, Takeshi entered the kitchen, wiping his hands on a towel. “You girls are doing a great job,” he said, his voice warm but slightly tired from the morning rush. He also seemed to be nursing a hangover. But that was normal.

“Thanks, Dad,” Sayuri replied, forcing a smile.

“Speaking of great jobs, how about we plan an excursion for tomorrow?” Takeshi suggested, leaning against the counter. “It’s been a while since we all did something fun together.”

All three sisters perked up at the idea, exchanging excited glances. “What do you have in mind?” Keiko asked, her enthusiasm palpable.

“Well, it’s winter, so outdoor options are a bit tricky,” Takeshi said, thinking aloud. “We could go to the Tokyo Tower. It’s a classic and has a great view.”

Sayuri’s heart sank a little. She wanted to be thrilled, but the thought of spending money on an outing made her hesitate. She remained silent, focusing on rinsing a bowl, her mind racing with worry about their finances.

Atsuko, ever the optimist, chimed in. “That sounds amazing! I’ve always wanted to see the view from up there!”

“Yeah, but what if it’s too cold?” Keiko countered, her brow furrowing. “We’ll freeze!”

Takeshi chuckled. “I think we can manage a little cold for a good adventure. Plus, the view will be beautiful with the city covered in snow.”

Still hesitant, Sayuri remained quiet, her thoughts swirling. She wanted to suggest something, but the weight of her father’s struggles held her back.

“Sayuri-chan, what do you think?” Takeshi asked, turning his gaze toward her.

“Um, I think it sounds nice,” she replied softly, avoiding his eyes.

“Just nice?” Atsuko teased. “You’re not very convincing!”

“Okay, okay! It sounds fun!” Sayuri relented, her cheeks flushing. “But can I invite Aya to come with us?”

“Sure! The more, the merrier,” Takeshi replied, smiling. “We can take the train, and it’ll be easy for her to join us.”

“Yay! I’ll ask her this afternoon,” Sayuri said, feeling a flicker of excitement. “I think she’d love it.”

“Great! It’ll be good to have a family day,” Takeshi said, trying to make the most of their time together. He spent so much of his life working, and moments like these were precious.

As the sisters finished cleaning up, Sayuri felt the tension easing. Even though her father had to work long hours and often seemed exhausted, he genuinely tried to create these opportunities for them. It was one Sunday a month they could count on, a small tradition that kept their family connected.

With the dishes cleaned and the kitchen tidy, they gathered for a moment of quiet satisfaction. “I can’t wait for tomorrow!” Atsuko exclaimed, her eyes shining with anticipation.

“Me neither!” Keiko added. “Let’s make it a day to remember!”

Sayuri smiled, feeling a sense of hope. Maybe this excursion would be a chance for her family to bond again, despite the challenges they faced. As they dried their hands and prepared to move on to the rest of the day, she felt a renewed sense of unity within her family.

“Okaasan, can I phone Aya and ask her mom permission for Aya to join us tomorrow? Please?”

“Of course, Sayuri-chan.”

Sayuri picked up the phone with a mix of excitement and nervousness. She dialled Aya’s home number, tapping her foot anxiously as she waited for someone to pick up. After a few rings, Aya’s mother, Akiko, answered.

“Konichiwa,” Akiko greeted warmly.

“Konichiwa, Mrs. Tanaka. It’s Sayuri,” she replied, her heart racing a little.

“Sayuri! How nice to hear from you. What can I do for you today?” Mrs. Tanaka asked, her voice cheerful.

“I wanted to see if Aya could join us for an excursion to Tokyo Tower tomorrow,” Sayuri said, trying to keep her tone light and casual.

“Oh, that sounds like fun!” Mrs. Tanaka responded. “But before I say yes, can I ask—what kind of punishment did you receive from your parents? Because I have grounded Aya, and I’m wondering why you’re allowed out.”

Sayuri felt a lump in her throat. “Well, I was grounded for a month, but I had a long conversation with my parents last night,” she explained, her words tumbling out. “They told me that now that they understand the situation a bit better, they have suspended my sentence.”

“Suspended? That sounds... generous,” Mrs. Tanaka remarked, a hint of scepticism in her voice.

“Hai, but it’s not all good news,” Sayuri continued, her heart sinking slightly. “Next time it will be double. Two months grounded.”

“Wow. That’s quite a consequence,” Mrs. Tanaka said, her tone softening. “I appreciate your honesty, Sayuri. It sounds like you’re trying to make things right with your parents.”

“I am,” Sayuri replied, feeling a little more confident. “I really think they’re trying to understand me better now.”

“Okay, let me talk to Aya about it,” Mrs. Tanaka said, her voice thoughtful. “I’ll go and find her. Hang on a minute.”

“Thank you! I promise we’ll be good,” Sayuri added quickly. “It’ll just be a fun day to hang out together.”

“Alright, I’ll let her know. Give me a moment,” Mrs. Tanaka said before putting the phone down.

Sayuri waited anxiously, her fingers tapping against the phone. Moments later, she heard footsteps and the familiar voice of Aya.

“Sayuri!” Aya exclaimed, her tone brightening. “What’s up? Are you OK? Are you in trouble? What happened last night?”

“Hi, Aya! So many questions. Everything is fine. Thank you for asking, my friend. I just asked your mom if you could come with us to Tokyo Tower tomorrow!” Sayuri said, unable to hide her excitement.

“Really? That sounds amazing! I’d love to!” Aya replied, her enthusiasm infectious.

“Just a heads-up, though—your mom was a little hesitant because of what happened before,” Sayuri cautioned. “But I told her I’m sort of off punishment for now.”

“Off punishment? That’s a relief!” Aya laughed. “I’ll talk to her and convince her it’s a good idea!”

“Great! I can’t wait!” Sayuri said, feeling a surge of happiness. “It’ll be fun to hang out together again.”

“Definitely! I’ll make sure to do finish my school project tonight. I’ll see you tomorrow then!” Aya said, her voice bubbling with excitement.

“Yay! I’m so happy! Yes, I must also finish my schoolwork tonight. Then tomorrow we can just relax. See you!”

“See you!” Aya replied before hanging up.

With a sense of anticipation building, Sayuri realized that tomorrow could be a turning point. She had been stressed for so long and it had been eating away at her and she knew that she had been on the edge of desperation. Finally, she had a chance to breath.

CHAPTER 3

It was gloomy in the kitchen as Sayuri and her family gathered for a light breakfast, the usual morning rays of sunshine partly blocked by the scattered snow clouds above Meguro City.

The table was set with fried eggs, toast, a few slices of salmon, and refreshing orange juice. Laughter and chatter filled the air as they enjoyed their meal together.

“Can you pass me the salmon?” Atsuko asked, her mouth half-full, causing everyone to chuckle.

“Only if you promise to save me some!” Keiko teased, reaching for the toast.

After breakfast, the family split up to tackle chores. Sayuri washed the dishes, rinsing off the plates while Atsuko wiped down the table and Keiko swept the kitchen floor. The rhythmic sound of the broom against the tiles was like a backdrop to their morning routine. Once the chores were finished, Sayuri checked the time and rushed to her room, where Aya was waiting. “We’re all done! Ready to head out?” she asked, her excitement bubbling over.

“Yep! Your dad said we could hang out here until he’s ready,” Aya replied, plopping down onto Sayuri’s bed.

“OK, cool,” Sayuri said, smiling as she tossed her jacket onto a chair.

They chatted about their plans for the day, discussing what they wanted to see at Tokyo Tower. Just then, they heard their father calling from the entrance.

“Okay, family—are you ready for the experience of a lifetime? Let’s go!” Takeshi’s voice echoed through the house, filled with enthusiasm.

Sayuri and Aya exchanged excited glances before hurrying out to join the rest of the family. They bundled up in their warm clothing—coats, scarves, and gloves—making sure they were prepared for the chilly weather outside.

“Let’s do a quick check,” Takeshi said, counting heads. “Sayuri, Aya, Keiko, Atsuko—everyone’s here. Perfect!”

“What about me?” Yoko teased. Takeshi smiled at her and said, “We are one, dear.”

With that, they set off on the short walk to Naka-meguro station. The air was crisp but not snowing, making it a pleasant morning for a family outing. The sound of their boots crunching on the gravel filled the silence, and the girls chatted animatedly about what they might see at the tower.

“Do you think we’ll be able to see Mt. Fuji from the top?” Keiko asked, her eyes wide with anticipation.

“Maybe! I hope it’s clear enough,” Atsuko replied, bouncing slightly with excitement.

Takeshi, overhearing the exchange, chipped in, “You might not believe this, but I first went to the Tokyo Tower when I was about your age Sayuri.”

“Wow, dad!” Sayuri exclaimed. “I didn’t realize that the tower was so old”, she said giggling.

“Funny girl,” her father shot back, smiling. “My point is, I know the answer to your question – yes, you can see Fuji-San from the tower, but it is best seen from the main deck. And, of course, it depends on how much air pollution and cloud cover there is.”

“Cool,” said Sayuri, nudging Aya and grinning. “It looks as if the snow last night cleared most of the pollution. And it’s only partly cloudy, so I think we have a chance. Fingers crossed.”

As they approached the station, Sayuri felt a surge of happiness. This family outing allayed some of her fears, especially her fear of having to deal with her stress by herself. It was comforting knowing that her family was always there for her. Once they reached Naka-meguro station, they navigated the turnstiles and made their way to the platform, the hustle and bustle of fellow commuters adding to the lively atmosphere. As they waited for the train, Takeshi made sure everyone was close by, a protective presence among the throng of people.

“Just a few stops and we’ll be at Tokyo Tower!” he announced, glancing at the schedule posted on the wall.

Sayuri looked over at Aya, who was beaming with excitement. “This is going to be so much fun!”

“Absolutely! I can’t wait to see the view!” Aya replied, her voice filled with enthusiasm.

As they stepped out of the elevator onto the deck, the breathtaking view of the sprawling city below took their breath away.

“I’m scared! It’s so high! Aiii!! Sayuri gasped, her eyes wide.

Below them, the angular skyline seemed to go on forever, the taller buildings arranged in clusters, descending in height as they spread away from each CBD, like ripples in a pond.

“Look! Look! You can see Mount Fuji!” Keiko squealed in delight, jumping up and down with joy, while Atsuko took out her 35mm ‘point and shoot’ camera and started snapping photos, trying to capture every moment.

“Atsuko, we only have one roll of film and we are here for a long time. Pace yourself with the photos.”

“Yes, Okaasan. Sumimasen.”

“Ha-ha!” Takeshi laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Yoko asked, frowning.

“I just noticed that Atsuko-chan’s camera is called Fuji. It’s funny.”

“It’s not THAT funny,” she retorted, rolling her eyes at him. The sisters looked nervously at each other, wondering if their parents were going to ruin the outing, but Yoko’s scowl melted into a smile and she smiled at them and took hold of her husband’s arm, like a good wife.

“Hey! Look! There’s our school!” cried Keiko.

“Where?” said Sayuri, trying to find the place that Keiko was pointing at.

“Over there, by the park.”

“Ahh! Yes! I can see it now. It’s so small.”

Takeshi and Yoko smiled as they watched the three sisters umm and ahh about all the landmarks they recognized. Then Yoko leant into her husband and spoke softly, “Please, papa, no drinking today. The children are happy. Let’s not spoil this memory for them. OK?”

“Hai, mama. No drinking for me today. I promise.”

“Good. Where are we eating?”

“I was thinking we can eat at the Sky Restaurant. What do you think?”

“I think you can’t afford it,” she replied quietly, looking directly into his eyes.

“You can’t put a price on family. Let’s not put restrictions on them today. They look so happy. I don’t want to ruin their outing.”

“I suppose you are right. I will rearrange the household budget for next month to balance it out. I just hope they are not ordering lobster,” she replied, forcing a weak smile.

“Ok, kids, I’m starving. How about we all go eat in the Sky restaurant? It’s really wonderful. The whole restaurant revolves and you can see views of the whole of Tokyo as you eat,” Takeshi proclaimed.

CHAPTER 4

Sayuri approached the school gates, the familiar sight of her classmates bustling around filling her with a mix of anticipation and dread. As she walked toward her classroom, she could feel the cool morning air against her skin, but it did little to quell the rising tension inside her. Suddenly, she heard a loud, mocking voice cut through the chatter.

“Shame. Poor Sayuri!”

Tomoko, her nemesis, stood a few feet away with her entourage of giggling friends, all of them looking in Sayuri’s direction.

“Look at her *randoseru*! It’s so *boroboro*! Her parents are so poor they can’t even buy her a new bag!”

Sayuri’s heart sank. She clenched her jaw and kept her gaze fixed ahead, refusing to let Tomoko see the hurt that threatened to spill over. Gaman, she reminded herself silently—endurance in the face of adversity. Each step felt heavier, but she pushed through, determined not to give Tomoko the satisfaction of a reaction.

Inside, she was seething. Yes, her *randoseru* was a hand-me-down from her older sisters, and yes, it was worn out, with frayed edges and faded patches. But it was also a piece of her family’s history, a reminder of the love and support that came with it. The thought of Tomoko mocking her for something so personal made her blood boil.

As she walked, she could feel the eyes of her classmates on her, some sympathetic, others enjoying the spectacle. She wanted to turn around, to shout something witty back at Tomoko, to defend herself. But she knew that engaging would only fuel the fire. Instead, she focused on her breathing, steady and calm.

“Look at her! She’s not even going to respond,” one of Tomoko’s friends whispered, giggling.

Sayuri felt her cheeks flush with anger, but she held her head high, pushing the door to her classroom open and stepping inside. The warmth of the room enveloped her, a stark contrast to the coldness she had just faced outside. As she settled into her seat, she glanced out the window, watching the students milling about. She wished she could be like them, carefree and unbothered. But each taunt from Tomoko felt like a weight on her shoulders, a reminder of her insecurities.

“Hey, Sayuri,” her classmate Yuki said, sliding into the seat next to her. “Are you okay? I saw what happened with Tomoko.”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Sayuri replied, forcing a smile. “Just trying to ignore her.”

Yuki frowned. “You shouldn’t have to deal with that. She’s just a bully.”

“I know,” Sayuri sighed, looking down at her desk. “But if I engage, it just makes it worse.”

Yuki nodded, understanding. “Just remember, you’re stronger than she is. And you have us.”

“What do mean – us?” Sayuri quizzed.

“All of us in your class who aren’t part of Tomoko’s ‘rich bitch’ crew. We’re on your side. Tomoko is focusing on you now, but any one of us could be next.”

Sayuri felt a flicker of warmth at her classmate’s words. Maybe she could endure this, just like she had learned to with her family’s struggles. “Thanks, Yuki. I appreciate it.”

As the teacher entered the room, Sayuri took a deep breath, letting go of the tension she had been holding. She would focus on her studies today, on her friends, and on the things that truly mattered. Tomoko’s words might sting, but they wouldn’t define her.

Clouds carpeted the sky as Sayuri walked alongside Aya, the familiar path home filled with the sounds of students laughing and chatting. The earlier tension of the day began to melt away, replaced by the comforting presence of her best friend.

“Ugh, can you believe Tomoko?” Sayuri vented, her frustration spilling out as they strolled. “She was at it again this morning, making fun of my *randoseru* in front of everyone. It was so humiliating!”

Aya’s brow furrowed, her expression shifting to concern. “That’s awful, Sayuri. I can’t believe she still does that. Why can’t she just grow up?”

“I don’t know,” Sayuri replied, kicking a small stone off the path. “It’s like she gets some twisted joy out of it. I just try to ignore her, but it’s hard.”

“I get that,” Aya said, her voice steady. “But you know what? You should go and see the school counsellor. Tell her about Tomoko’s persistent bullying. That’s her job, after all.”

Sayuri hesitated, the idea of seeking help making her stomach twist.

“I don’t know, Aya. What if they don’t take me seriously? What if it just makes things worse?”

Aya stopped walking and turned to face Sayuri, her expression earnest. “But what if it helps? You deserve to feel safe at school, Sayuri. You shouldn’t have to put up with this alone.”

Sayuri looked into Aya’s eyes, feeling the weight of her words. She had always admired Aya’s courage, her willingness to stand up for what was right. “You really think it would make a difference?”

“Absolutely. The counsellor can help you figure out a way to handle Tomoko. You shouldn’t have to just endure it,” Aya encouraged. “And who knows, maybe there are other students who feel the same way.”

Sayuri bit her lip, considering Aya’s suggestion. The thought of speaking up felt daunting, but the idea of continuing to suffer in silence was even worse. “Okay, maybe I will,” she finally said, her voice small but determined. “I’ll think about it tonight.”

“That’s all I ask,” Aya replied, her smile brightening. “You’re not alone in this, Sayuri. I’m here for you. Always.”

Feeling a sense of relief wash over her, Sayuri nodded. “Thanks, Aya. I really appreciate it. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

They resumed their walk, the conversation shifting to lighter topics as they planned their weekend. But in the back of Sayuri’s mind, a seed of hope had been planted. Maybe, just maybe, it was time to take a stand and seek the help she needed. As they approached Sayuri’s house, the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a golden glow over the street. The familiar sights of their neighbourhood felt comforting, making Sayuri grateful for the companionship of her best friend.

“Thanks for walking me home, Aya,” Sayuri said, her heart lighter after their conversation about the counsellor.

“Of course! I always love our walks,” Aya replied, her smile bright.

They reached Sayuri’s front gate, and after a moment of hesitation, Aya turned to leave. Just as she was about to walk away, she called out.

“Oh! I can walk with you to school tomorrow. I don’t have to go early for chorus club like I did this morning. See you in the morning! I’ll meet you at the park, OK?”

Sayuri’s face lit up, the thought of starting the day with Aya lifting her spirits even higher. “Yay! I missed you this morning,” she replied, feeling a warmth spread through her. “See you in the morning! And don’t forget to do your English homework.”

Aya laughed, waving her hand dismissively. “I won’t forget! I promise! See you bright and early!”

“Bright and early!” Sayuri echoed as Aya walked away, her heart feeling a little lighter with each step.

As she entered her house, she couldn’t help but smile. Tomorrow would be a new day, a chance to start fresh with her friend by her side. And maybe, just maybe, she would find the courage to talk to the counsellor about Tomoko. With that thought in mind, Sayuri closed the door, ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

As Sayuri stepped inside, the familiar scent of home enveloped her. She walked into the dining room, where her mother, Yoko, was seated at the table, surrounded by a chaotic spread of papers. A calculator rested in her hands, and a pen scratched against a notepad as she scribbled notes.

“Hi, Mom!” Sayuri greeted, her voice bright, but it quickly faded as she noticed the furrow in her mother’s brow.

“Hello, Sayuri!” Yoko replied warmly, looking up with a forced smile. But there was something in her eyes that hinted at deeper worries.

“Is everything okay?” Sayuri asked, concern creeping into her voice.

“All is well,” Yoko assured her, but Sayuri could sense the lie beneath the surface. The pile of accounts and statements scattered across the table spoke

volumes—each document a reminder of the financial strain the family was facing. Sayuri hesitated, wanting to press further, but she reminded herself that it wasn't her place to interfere with her parents' business.

"Alright, I just wanted to check," she said softly. "I'll be in my room."

"Thank you, dear," Yoko replied, her attention shifting back to the papers.

As Sayuri made her way to her room, a knot of worry twisted in her stomach. She sat down at her desk and opened her English textbook, but the words blurred together. She tried to focus on her homework, but her mind kept drifting back to her mother.

Seldom had she seen her mom so stressed. The sight of her mother hunched over the table, calculator in hand, made Sayuri's heart ache. She thought of the sacrifices her parents made and how hard they worked to provide for the family. It felt like the weight of the world rested on her mother's shoulders, and Sayuri wished there was something she could do to help.

After several minutes of futile concentration, Sayuri sighed and closed her textbook. She stood up and paced around her room, her thoughts racing. *What if I just asked her directly?* But the thought of pushing her mother to share what she was clearly trying to handle alone felt daunting.

Instead, Sayuri returned to the dining room, where Yoko was still engrossed in her calculations. "Mom, is there anything I can do to help?" she offered, her voice gentle.

Yoko looked up, surprise flickering across her face. "Oh, sweetie, you don't need to worry about this. I'm just sorting through some things."

"But I can help! I know how to organize stuff, or I could help with the calculations," Sayuri insisted, wanting to ease the burden she felt pressing down on her mother.

Yoko's expression softened, and she put the calculator down. "You're such a good girl, Sayuri. I appreciate your offer, but it's just a bit of budgeting. I'll manage."

Sayuri nodded, though her heart remained heavy. "Okay, Mom. Just remember, I'm here if you need me."

"Thank you, dear," Yoko said, her smile genuine this time. "Now go finish your homework. I'll call you if I need anything."

Reluctantly, Sayuri retreated back to her room, the weight of her mother's worries still lingering in her mind. She resolved to keep an eye on her mother and, if necessary, find a way to support her without overstepping. For now, she would focus on her studies, but the concern for her family remained a constant hum in her thoughts.

The morning brought with it a crispness in the air that hinted at the changing seasons. Sayuri walked to the park, her favourite spot to wait for Aya before school. She settled onto a weathered bench, pulling out some breadcrumbs from her bag to feed the flock of pigeons that gathered around her. As she scattered the bread, she watched the birds eagerly pecking at the crumbs, each one with its own little personality. Sayuri loved

animals for their simplicity; they didn't judge or hold grudges. If you fed them, they showed you love—no drama, just pure, uncomplicated affection.

Lost in thought, she barely noticed when Aya arrived, her cheerful voice breaking the tranquillity. "Ohayo!"

"Good morning, Aya!" Sayuri replied, looking up with a smile. "Do you want to feed the birds quickly before we walk to school?"

"Sure!" Aya said, joining her on the bench. They both reached into the bag, tossing breadcrumbs to the pigeons.

"Look at that one!" Sayuri pointed to a particularly bold pigeon that strutted around, pecking at the crumbs with confidence. "He thinks he owns the place."

Aya laughed. "And that one over there is so shy! He keeps hiding behind the others." They spent another minute observing the various personalities of the dozen or so pigeons, enjoying this small moment of peace before the school day began. Eventually, they finished feeding the birds and stood up. "Ready to go?" Sayuri asked.

"Yep! Let's hurry!" Aya replied, and they set off toward school, chatting about their weekend.

As they walked, Sayuri felt a flutter of determination in her chest.

"Aya, I've decided to go see the counsellor. I have nothing to lose," she said, her voice steady.

Aya's eyes lit up with joy. "Really? That's amazing, Sayuri!" She pulled Sayuri into a warm hug. "I'm so proud of you!"

The two friends arrived at school just in time for the morning assembly. They found their seats among the students, and the headmistress, a dignified woman known as the *josei kocho*, stepped onto the stage.

"Good morning, students," she began, standing at the lectern. "Today, I want to address an important issue: lateness. Students arriving late will face detention and additional school chores." Her voice was firm, resonating through the auditorium. Sayuri exchanged a glance with Aya, who rolled her eyes at the mention of detention. The headmistress continued, discussing values such as respect, responsibility, and teamwork. "We must work together to foster a positive environment for everyone," she said, her tone inspiring.

Then, she called a student up to the stage to award her a certificate for coming first in the regional Science Fair. The applause echoed through the room, and Sayuri clapped along, though her thoughts were still lingering on the counsellor.

"And in closing," the headmistress announced, her voice growing more animated, "I would like to share some exciting news: we will be building an indoor swimming pool at the school next year, thanks to a generous donation from the Mitsui family!"

Cheers erupted from the students, but the headmistress quickly cut them off. "That will be all. Please hurry to your classes now."

As they shuffled out of the auditorium, Aya nudged Sayuri and whispered, "If she is serious about fostering a positive environment, she must stop school bullying." Sayuri looked at her friend and nodded, feeling a rush of solidarity. Just then, Aya turned to her, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. "Isn't Tomoko's surname Mitsui?"

Sayuri felt a chill run down her spine. "I think so," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. The connection lingered in the air between them, an unspoken understanding of the complexities that lay ahead. As they hurried to class, Sayuri felt a mix of determination and apprehension. *I can't NOT go to the counsellor. I must at least try resolve my Tomoko problem. I really have nothing to lose*, she thought as she unpacked her *randoseru*.

As Sayuri walked home with Aya, the chatter from their classmates faded into the background, and the comfortable silence between the two friends felt reassuring.

"So, did you go and see the school counsellor?" Aya asked, glancing sideways at Sayuri.

"Yes, I did," Sayuri replied, a hint of pride in her voice. "She said I must make an appointment. No walk-ins."

Aya's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Did you make an appointment?"

"Hai. It's tomorrow during lunch break," Sayuri said, smiling at her friend's enthusiasm.

"Yay! I'm so proud of you!" Aya exclaimed, pulling Sayuri into a quick hug.

Sayuri chuckled, teasingly adding, "I always thought the reason you don't have a boyfriend is because you like girls. Now I know for sure."

Aya laughed, a playful twinkle in her eyes. "You don't like hugs, do you?"

"Not really," Sayuri admitted, feeling a bit shy. "It's not something I'm used to."

"What about your sisters?" Aya inquired, curious.

"Well, we get along fine, but they're not really touchy-feely people either. I guess it just never was a 'thing' in our household."

"Has your dad ever hugged you?" Aya asked, her voice softening.

"Yes, once or twice," Sayuri replied, her tone slightly distant.

"That is so sad," Aya said, her eyes wide with sympathy. "My parents hug me every day. Doesn't it bother you?" Aya asked, genuinely curious.

"Not really. I still feel loved by my family. I guess if you're not used to something, then you don't miss it," Sayuri explained with a shrug.

"True, I suppose," Aya said, pondering Sayuri's words. "But I am used to it now. If my parents ever stopped hugging me, I would feel that they no longer love me."

"Not all families are the same," Sayuri replied gently.

Sayuri felt a pang of discomfort at the conversation, not wanting to delve deeper into feelings and family dynamics. She shifted the topic, hoping to lighten the mood. “What is your family planning for Christmas?”

Aya’s face lit up at the change of subject. “Oh, we’re planning a big family dinner! My mom always makes her special curry, and we decorate the house together. It’s so much fun!”

“That sounds lovely!” Sayuri said, smiling at her friend’s excitement. “Do you have any special traditions?”

“Yeah! We always watch a Christmas movie together after dinner. Last year, we watched *A Christmas Carol* for the millionth time!” Aya laughed. “What about your family? Do you do anything special?”

Sayuri paused, thinking. “We usually just have a quiet dinner. My mom makes a nice meal, but it’s nothing too fancy. We might watch a movie, too, but it depends on everyone’s mood.”

Aya nodded, catching the hint of wistfulness in Sayuri’s tone. “Well, maybe you could start a new tradition this year! It could be fun!”

“Maybe,” Sayuri replied, her mind wandering. The thought of creating new memories felt both exciting and daunting. She appreciated Aya’s optimism, even if it sometimes made her feel a bit vulnerable. As they continued their walk home, the conversation flowed easily, drifting from holiday plans to school gossip. For Sayuri, it was a welcome distraction, a reminder of the warmth of friendship amidst the complexities of family life.

CHAPTER 5

Sayuri sat in the cozy office of Miss Honda, the school counsellor, feeling both anxious and relieved. The walls were adorned with cheerful posters promoting kindness and mental health, but her heart still raced as she faced the counsellor.

“So, your name is Ichikawa, Sayuri? Is that correct?” Miss Honda asked, her tone warm and inviting.

“Hai,” Sayuri replied softly, gripping the edges of her seat.

“Thank you for coming in today, Sayuri. I know it can be hard to reach out for help,” Miss Honda continued, her notepad and pen ready. “I’m here to listen and support you. Can you tell me what brought you here?”

Taking a deep breath, Sayuri hesitated, the words caught in her throat. “Well, um, there’s been some bullying at school... from a girl named Tomoko.”

“Are you referring to Tomoko Mitsui?” Miss Honda asked, a distasteful look on her face.

“Hai!”

Miss Honda nodded, jotting down notes as she listened intently. “I see. And how has that made you feel?”

Sayuri felt the familiar rush of emotions as she recalled the taunts and jeers. “It’s made me feel really upset and alone. I try to ignore her, but it’s hard when she makes fun of my *randoseru* and other things in front of everyone.”

“That sounds very difficult,” Miss Honda said, her expression empathetic. “Bullying can have a huge impact on a person’s well-being. Have you talked to anyone else about this?”

“Not really. I didn’t want to bother my friends or my family,” Sayuri admitted, looking down at her hands, feeling the weight of her silence.

Miss Honda leaned forward slightly, her gaze reassuring. “You’re not bothering anyone by sharing your feelings, Sayuri. It’s important to talk about what you’re experiencing. Have you thought about what you’d like to see happen moving forward?”

Sayuri pondered for a moment, feeling the heaviness of her emotions. “I just want it to stop. I don’t want to feel scared to go to school every day.”

Miss Honda nodded thoughtfully. “That’s completely understandable. We can work together to come up with some strategies to address the bullying and help you feel safer.”

A wave of relief washed over Sayuri at the thought of having someone on her side. “That would be nice,” she said quietly, her voice filled with gratitude.

“Great! We can also look into ways to build your confidence and resilience,” Miss Honda suggested, her pen moving quickly across the notepad. “And remember, it’s okay to ask for help from your teachers and friends, too.”

Sayuri nodded, feeling a flicker of hope. “Thank you, Miss Honda. I appreciate it.”

“Of course, Sayuri. You’re taking a brave step by coming here, and I’m glad you did,” Miss Honda said, her voice encouraging. “I must also let you know that I have to discuss all student issues brought to me with the School Disciplinary Committee. Be assured—your personal information will remain confidential. Nobody will know your name. The next committee meeting is scheduled for next week, so I will be able to give you feedback a few days after that, OK?”

“Hai. Arigatou gozaimasu,” Sayuri replied, her heart swelling with gratitude. Miss Honda smiled warmly. “You’re welcome. Remember, you’re not alone in this. We’ll work through it together.”

As Sayuri left the office, she felt a sense of empowerment. For the first time, she had taken a step toward change, and that small act filled her with determination.

The gymnasium echoed with the sounds of sneakers squeaking against the polished wooden floor as Sayuri stood in her white sweatpants and T-shirt, the school insignia emblazoned on her chest. It was a typical day in PE class, and Mr. Takahashi had just gathered the students for warm-up exercises.

“OK. Touch your toes and hold for ten,” he instructed, and the class complied, bending forward in unison. Sayuri was in the front row, her focus on the task, trying to mentally block out the giggles coming from behind her.

“Stop that giggling!” Mr. Takahashi shouted, his voice cutting through the chatter. “Exercise is to be taken seriously. Healthy body—healthy mind! Remember that!”

As the class shifted into the next phase, Mr. Takahashi split the students into two basketball teams. The extra students sat on the bleachers, ready to rotate in as the lesson continued. Sayuri felt a familiar flutter of anxiety; she was not naturally athletic, and the thought of playing basketball made her stomach turn.

Tomoko, with her usual smugness, found herself on the opposing team. As the game started, Sayuri noticed Tomoko dribbling the ball with purpose, her eyes fixed on Sayuri.

“Look out! She’s coming for you!” one of the students called out, laughter bubbling from the group.

“Put your hands out! Knock the ball away from her!” Mr. Takahashi instructed, his voice booming.

Startled by the sudden command, Sayuri’s mind froze. In her haste to comply, she stumbled forward, tripping and falling face-first onto the hardwood floor. In a split-second reflex, she managed to put her hands out just in time to break her fall.

“Are you OK?” a classmate shouted, but before anyone could rush over, Tomoko’s voice rang out, dripping with mockery.

“Look! Ichikawa is bleeding!” jeered Tomoko.

The gym fell silent for a moment, confusion spreading like wildfire. Everyone turned to Sayuri, who lay on the ground, puzzled. There was no reason she should be bleeding; she hadn’t fallen hard enough.

Tomoko, sensing the attention, continued, “Shame on the poor little girl. Can’t even afford sanitary pads. What a loser!” Her laughter echoed through the gym, sharp and cruel.

Sayuri felt a rush of heat flood her cheeks, a mix of embarrassment and anger boiling within her. The laughter that followed from Tomoko and some of her friends felt like a punch to the gut. In that moment, something shifted inside Sayuri. She sprang up off the floor, adrenaline coursing through her veins. With a fierce determination, she grabbed the basketball from Tomoko’s hands and, without a word, hurled it straight at her face.

The ball collided with a loud thud, and the laughter abruptly stopped. Tomoko staggered back, shock replacing her smug expression. The gym was silent, all eyes on Sayuri, who stood there, breathing heavily, feeling a surge of empowerment she hadn’t anticipated.

Mr. Takahashi’s voice broke through the tension. “Ichikawa! What’s going on here? What did you do?” Tomoko stood in the middle of the gym, her hands pressed to her face, blood trickling from her nose. “My nose is broken! My nose is broken!” she wailed, her voice rising in pitch. “You little bitch, Sayuri! I’m going to get you for this!”

Mr. Takahashi quickly moved to retrieve the first-aid kit mounted on the wall. “Calm down, Tomoko. It will be fine. It’s not broken,” he said, his voice steady but firm. He handed her a piece of cotton wool.

“Stick this in each nostril and report to the sick bay immediately.”

With a sulky nod, Tomoko obeyed, still complaining as she walked away, her friends whispering and comforting her as she left the gym. The atmosphere was a mix of shock and relief among the remaining students.

“You girls stay here!” Mr. Takahashi shouted after Tomoko’s group. “She can walk by herself!”

Turning his attention back to Sayuri, he said, “Ichikawa, go sit on the bench. I will deal with you in a moment.” Sayuri felt a wave of anxiety wash over her as she shuffled to the bench, her heart racing.

“The rest of you do laps around the court,” Mr. Takahashi instructed, directing the remaining students. “I will be back in a few minutes. Aya, you are in charge. If the girls are not running when I return, you will be held responsible. OK?”

“Hai!” Aya responded, her voice bright but her eyes worried as she glanced back at Sayuri. She gave Sayuri a small, sympathetic signal, silently apologizing for the trouble Sayuri was in.

As the other girls began to jog around the court, Mr. Takahashi gestured for Sayuri to follow him to the *tanto kyōshi*’s office. Sayuri’s stomach twisted with dread, but she stood up and followed him, her mind racing with thoughts of what might happen next.

In the hallway, Mr. Takahashi walked briskly, his expression serious. “I need to speak with your homeroom teacher about what happened,” he said, glancing back at Sayuri. “You acted impulsively, but I understand that everyone has their breaking point.”

Sayuri nodded, feeling both guilt and a strange sense of relief at his understanding. Maybe this was an opportunity to explain everything—the bullying, the teasing, and how Tomoko had pushed her too far this time. When they reached the homeroom office, Mr. Takahashi knocked on the door and entered. Sayuri followed, her heart pounding as they stepped into the room filled with the familiar scent of chalk and books.

“Mr. Takahashi, what brings you here?” asked, Mrs. Matsumoto, the *tanto kyōshi*, looking up from her desk.

“Miss Ichikawa here had an incident during PE class,” Mr. Takahashi began, and Sayuri felt her cheeks flush. “I think it’s important we discuss it.”

As they settled into the conversation, Sayuri prepared to share her side of the story, hoping to finally be heard and understood. There was a good chance that she would be punished for her actions, but she didn’t care. For the first time, she had stood up for herself, and it felt good.

The afternoon sun hid behind a carpet of dark grey clouds as Sayuri and Aya walked out the school gate, their footsteps echoing on the pavement. Aya turned to Sayuri, a proud smile lighting up her face.

“I’m really proud of you for standing up to Tomoko,” Aya said, her tone genuine. “OK, maybe it wasn’t the best idea to make her bleed, but I did enjoy seeing her in pain.” Sayuri chuckled, feeling a mix of relief and lingering tension.

“Can I give you a hug? Please, please, please?” Aya pleaded, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

“Sure, just this once. We don’t want to be making a habit of it, OK?” Sayuri replied, turning to face her friend. They embraced, a brief moment of warmth amidst the day’s chaos.

“OK—now tell me what happened. Are you in trouble?” Aya asked, pulling back to look at Sayuri.

“I guess so,” Sayuri admitted, a hint of anxiety creeping into her voice.

“No, no short answers. Tell me all, my friend,” Aya insisted, her curiosity piqued.

“Well, Mr. Takahashi took me to our homeroom teacher, Mrs. Matsumoto. I explained to her that Tomoko is always bullying me and that I have discussed it with the school counsellor,” Sayuri began, her words tumbling out. “She said that was no excuse for being violent. But she also said that because I’m a good student with good grades, and it was my first disciplinary action, she won’t take it any further.”

“Is that it?” Aya asked, a note of disappointment creeping into her voice. “No punishment?”

“Not really. I have to do detention for five days next week, and I have a letter from Mrs. Matsumoto to give to my mom. I have no idea what she wrote,” Sayuri explained, her shoulders slumping slightly. “And I also have to write a reflection letter for Mrs. Matsumoto stating how I intend to learn from my mistake.”

“Mistake?” asked Aya. “What do you mean?”

“My mistake I made by getting violent with Tomoko.”

“I see. Are you nervous about what Mrs. Matsumoto has written in her letter to your mom?” Aya asked, her expression concerned.

“A little bit,” Sayuri admitted. “But what’s done is done. I just have to deal with it. Gaman. Oh! There is one more thing.”

“What?” asked Aya curiously.

“I have to apologize to Tomoko face to face.”

“Whaaat! No way! She started!” cried Aya indignantly.

“I’m afraid so,” said Sayuri sighing. “Tomorrow.”

“Well, if that’s the case, I’ll come with you. May I? Come with you...?”

“Yes, but only if you stay one step behind me. I don’t want it to look like we are ganging up on her. That might just make her madder and more spiteful. OK?”

“Ok, deal!” she said with vigour, spitting on the palm of her hand and offering it to Sayuri to cement the deal with a handshake. Sayuri smiled, laughed and shook her hand, “You’re an idiot,” she said fondly.

“Baka,” teased Aya and they both laughed. It was good to laugh with her friend. There hadn’t been much to laugh about lately.

“Oh! I almost forgot! What was the story with you bleeding through your sweatpants? Are seriously too poor to buy tampons?”

“Nooooo! That’s not it at all. You know very well that I keep a menstruation calendar. I’m only due in two days’ time, so that’s why I never packed tampons.”

“Ahh! I understand,” Aya mused. “So, what do you think made you bleed early?”

“I don’t know. I don’t feel comfortable asking my mom.”

“What about your sisters? You could ask them? Atsuko should know. She has a boyfriend.”

“What has a boyfriend got to do with anything,” Sayuri laughed. Men are even more clueless about female plumbing than we are,” she smiled. “I’ll ask Keiko. I’m closer to Keiko. If she doesn’t know, I’ll see if I can look it up the library the next time I go study there.”

“That sounds like a plan,” agreed Aya.

They continued chatting, moving on to lighter topics, the weight of the day slowly lifting as they walked. When they reached Sayuri’s house, they stopped in front of the gate.

“See you tomorrow!” Aya said, waving goodbye.

“Bye, Aya! Thanks for being there,” Sayuri replied, a smile breaking through as she watched her friend walk away.

As she stepped into her home, Sayuri felt a mix of apprehension and determination. The day had been a turning point, and she was ready to face whatever came next. She paused for a moment, listening to the silence. Keiko and Atsuko were still busy with their school clubs, and both mom and dad were at work. The house felt empty, yet strangely comforting. With a sigh, Sayuri walked down the hallway and entered her parents’ bedroom. She placed the school letter on her mother’s bedside table, glancing around at the cozy decor, a mixture of family photos and soft colours. It felt important to her to leave the letter where her mom would see it first.

After a moment, she turned and headed to the kitchen. Weak sunlight filtered through the window, slightly illuminating the fruit basket on the dining room table. She grabbed a shiny red apple, its surface glistening, and took a crisp bite. The sweet juice burst in her mouth, providing a refreshing distraction. As she chewed, an idea struck her. She didn’t have to set the table for supper, but she knew how much her mother appreciated it when she did. Especially today, with the disciplinary letter weighing on her mind. She wanted to keep her mom happy.

Sayuri walked into the dining room, pulling out the plates and utensils from the cupboard. She arranged everything neatly on the table, making sure each place was perfectly set. The rhythmic clinking of the dishes filled the otherwise quiet space, and she felt a sense of pride in her small act of care. Once satisfied with her work, she headed to her room. The familiar sight of her desk and books greeted her, and she sank into her chair, pulling out her homework.

As she flipped through her assignments, the events of the day replayed in her mind. She took a deep breath, focusing on the tasks before her. With each problem solved and each page read, she felt a sense of normalcy return, a reminder that despite the challenges, she had a place here—one filled with love and support, even in the quiet moments.

Sayuri’s back was stiff. *Just tension*, she told herself, stretching. She glanced out the window. It was getting darker. *Keiko and Atsuko should be home soon*, she mused.

Their family house was not really big enough for all of them, but it *was* in a quiet suburban neighbourhood of Meguro City. She was grateful for the peace and quiet. She didn’t like noise. She was even more grateful for the fact that they didn’t live in an apartment block. “That would be unbearable,” she shuddered at the thought.

There was a small park nearby and a few small shops down the road that sold basic groceries, which her mother usually bought on the way home from her part-time job. Their modest two-story house was far better than any apartment she decided. They were poor, but they did OK with what they had. “Well, at least, I thought we did,” she thought as she recounted her mother trying to balance the family budget.

As she sat cross-legged on the bedroom floor, surrounded by textbooks and notebooks, her brow furrowed in concentration, there was a sudden sharp knock on the front door, which echoed through the house. Startled, Sayuri glanced at the clock on her wall. Her parents were still at work, and she was alone. The knocking grew more insistent, and a chill of unease crept over her.

She hesitated, her heart pounding. Who could it be? With a deep breath, Sayuri stood up and walked cautiously toward the front door. As she approached, she could see two figures through the frosted glass. Taking a moment to gather her courage, she opened the door slightly, peering out.

Two 30-something men in dark suits stood almost in the doorway, their expressions serious and unreadable. She felt intimidated. They did not step back, so she took a big step back, ensuring that they were no longer in her personal 'bubble'.

"Good evening," one of the men said, his voice firm but not unkind. "We're here to speak with your parents about an important matter."

Sayuri felt a rush of anxiety. *What could this be about?*

"My parents aren't home right now," she replied, her voice a bit shaky.

The men exchanged glances. "We understand, but this is urgent. We need to discuss a very important financial matter with them. When will they be back?"

Sayuri's stomach dropped. She knew that there were money issues, but her parents had always shielded her from the details. "I... I can't help you. They'll be home later."

The men remained calm but persistent.

"We need to resolve this issue. It's important for your family."

Feeling overwhelmed, Sayuri looked at her feet, then back at the men.

"Please, can you come back another time?"

There was a moment of silence as the men considered her request. "We can leave a notice," one of them said, pulling out a business card and a small envelope. "But we will need to speak to them soon."

Sayuri nodded, relief flooding over her. She took the envelope, feeling the weight of the situation settle heavily on her shoulders. As the men turned to leave, she closed the door and leaned against it, her mind racing and her legs turning to jelly. She had to sit down. Immediately.

What would she tell her parents? The world outside felt suddenly larger and more daunting, and she realized that the innocence of her schoolwork and teenage worries was slipping away, replaced by a reality she wasn't quite ready to face. Bullying seemed quite unimportant to her at that moment.

CHAPTER 6

Sayuri sat at the dining room table, the clock's hands inching toward 9 PM. The faint hum of the refrigerator filled the silence, but her heart pounded in her ears, drowning out the mundane sounds of the evening. She glanced at the door, her stomach twisting with anxiety.

Her two older sisters were tucked away in their rooms, absorbed in their homework, blissfully unaware of the storm brewing just outside their bubble of normalcy. Sayuri had made a choice to keep the debt collectors visit a secret and it felt like a weight pressing down on her chest. She didn't want to add to the worries that already loomed over their family.

The disciplinary letter from school also played on her conscience. She had placed it on her mother's bedside table, fully aware of the burden it would bring. Sayuri felt a wave of guilt wash over her. Her mother would come home to not just one concern but two—an unwelcome reminder of Sayuri's missteps alongside the looming threat of financial instability.

She sighed, rubbing her temples as she tried to weigh her options. Telling her father would only lead to chaos. He was likely to stumble through the door, drunk and brimming with anger, ready to lash out at anything in his way. The thought of his shouts echoing through the house sent a chill down her spine.

Just then, the sound of keys jingled outside, and her breath caught in her throat. The door creaked open, and in stumbled her father, the smell of alcohol wafting through the air. His face was flush, eyes glassy, and the moment he saw her, a flicker of annoyance crossed his features.

"Where's dinner?" he slurred; his voice thick with irritation.

"Otosama, Konnichiwa," greeted Sayuri.

"Konnichiwa Sayuri-chan," her father mumbled. "Is your mother still at work?"

"Hai!" Sayuri quickly composed herself, forcing a smile. "I can make you some tea. Would you like that?"

He waved a dismissive hand, but she moved to the kitchen, her nerves on edge. She filled the kettle, hoping the warmth of the boiling water would soothe her nerves. As she waited, she thought about the conversation she should have had—about the debt collectors, the fear that loomed over their family. It felt like a heavy stone lodged in her throat, but she swallowed it down.

When she returned with the steaming cup, her father had sunk into a chair, his head resting in his hands. She placed the tea in front of him and hesitated, searching for the right words. But as he took a long sip, she saw the tension ease slightly in his shoulders. Perhaps tonight was not the night.

"Just tired," he muttered, not looking up. "Work's been hell."

Sayuri nodded, biting her lip. "Maybe you should get some rest."

“Yeah, sure,” he replied, the warmth of the tea seeming to calm him for now.

“Mom left you some soba in the fridge. I had some. It was very tasty. Should I bring you some Ootosan?”

“It’s OK Sayuri-chan. I’ll help myself in a moment. I’m just going to rest for a while. Thank you.”

With her heart still heavy, she decided to retreat. “OK Ootosan, I’m going to bed then,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Goodnight,” he mumbled, his attention drifting away again.

As she climbed the stairs, she felt the weight of her decision settle over her. She would talk to her mother tomorrow when they could be alone. The thought of facing both issues at once felt daunting, but perhaps separating them could lessen the burden.

In her room, the silence enveloped her. She lay on her bed, staring fixedly at the geometric patches of light the streetlights cast on her bedroom ceiling. She resolved to be brave. Tomorrow would be different; tomorrow she would face the truth, and hopefully, together, they could find a way through the darkness.

Sayuri tossed and turned throughout the night, her thoughts swirling with worry about her family's financial problems. The disciplinary issue at school felt insignificant in the grand scheme of things, but it still weighed heavily on her mind. As dawn broke, she finally decided to get up, feeling restless and anxious.

She dressed quickly, pulling on her school uniform with a sense of determination. After a moment’s hesitation, she made her way to the kitchen, hoping to catch her mother alone before the morning rush began.

Her mother was already busy preparing breakfast, the comforting aroma of rice and miso soup filling the air. Sayuri stepped into the room, a warm smile on her face despite her worries. “Good morning, Mom!” she greeted, her voice more cheerful than she felt.

“Good morning, Sayuri!” her mother replied, glancing up with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “You’re up early today.”

“Yeah, I wanted to talk to you,” Sayuri said, her heart pounding slightly. “Did you have time to read the letter from the school?”

Her mother nodded, setting down a spatula. “Yes, I read it.” There was a brief pause as she gathered her thoughts. “It explains the incident with Tomoko. The school won’t issue a formal warning this time since you’re a good student, and it’s your first disciplinary issue. But you still have to do detention after school the whole of next week.”

Sayuri was pleased that her mother was being so calm about the school letter.

“Yes, they have already told me about detention,” she said quietly, ashamed at disappointing her mother.

Her mother continued; her tone steady. “They noted your good grades and behaviour, and I think it’s clear to all that it was not a premeditated act. It’s important to remember

that everyone makes mistakes, Sayuri. What matters is how you move forward from here.”

Sayuri nodded, appreciating her mother’s calm demeanour, even as her own thoughts raced. “Thanks for understanding, Mom. I just... I don’t want to add to our problems.”

Her mother’s expression softened, and she reached out to squeeze Sayuri’s hand. “You’re not adding to anything, sweetheart. You’re doing your best, and that’s all we can ask for.”

She still was not sure how to break the bad news to her mom – that debt collectors had come knocking. “Thank you for understanding mom. You’re the best,” she said, feeling slightly relieved despite her knowledge that things could get very messy once she told her mom about yesterday’s visitors to the house.

Sayuri felt a flicker of comfort in her mother’s words, but the weight of their financial struggles still loomed large in her mind. Just then, Keiko and Atsuko joined them in the kitchen.

“Morning mom,” they chorused. As they ate breakfast together, Sayuri couldn’t shake the feeling that she needed to do more—more to help, more to support her family. She finished her breakfast, washed her dishes quickly and announced that she was going to meet Aya in the park.

“Mom, today is your day off, isn’t it?”

“Hai,” she replied as she cleared the table. “Why do you ask?”

“I have something important to tell you, but I don’t have time now. Can we talk after school? I’ll be sure to come directly after school finishes – my detention only starts next week.”

“Detention!” exclaimed Atsuko. “Why do YOU have detention? You are a goody-two-shoes.”

“I’ll tell you tonight, sister. Both of you. I have to go meet Aya now.”

“OK, can’t wait to hear all the wicked things you have done, my sneaky sister,” Atsuko teased.

“OK, bye! Mom, I’ll see you after school.”

“Bye, Sayuri. Have a good day, if you can. We will speak after school. Oh, before I forget – I signed the school letter and it is on the table by the front door. Put it in your bag now.”

“Ok mom. Arigatou gozaimasu. I will make sure to do that. Jaa ne.”

Aya arrived at the park just as Sayuri was about to sit on the bench and feed the pigeons. “Ohayo!”

“Ohayo!” Sayuri greeted back.

As they walked to school, Sayuri told Aya about the debt collectors.

“Shoo! That’s scary! I’ve heard stories about those debt collectors. Rumour has it that they are Yakuza affiliated.”

“They *were* very scary. I thought I was going to collapse; my legs were shaking so much!”

“Did you tell your parents? What did they say?”

“No, my father was drunk again and my mother was at work, but I told my mom this morning that I have something very important to tell her after school. So, I can’t walk home with you today, OK?”

“Of course, my friend. I completely understand. I don’t envy you – having to break such devastating news to your mom.”

“Thank you for understanding, Aya. This is going to be such a crappy day – I also have to apologise to Tomoko. My life sucks!”

“Ahh, yes – Tomoko! That bitch!”

“Let’s walk a bit faster, Aya. I finished the reflection letter Mrs. Matsumoto asked me to write. I want to give to her this morning. I would like you to read it before class starts and see if you think it is OK to hand in. Please?”

“Of course. I’ll race you. But no running. Heels have to touch the ground first, OK?” she smiled as she lengthened her stride.

“Here it is,” said Sayuri breathing heavily, as she took her reflection letter out of her *randoseru* and handed it to Aya to proofread.

“Ok. Let me have a quick look,” she said seriously, as she sat down and put her reading glasses on. Aya was very creative, both with words and art, and Sayuri trusted her judgement. She read the letter out loud:

“On this occasion, I deeply reflect on and apologize for behaving in a manner unbefitting of a middle school student by getting violent with another student. I write this reflection with sincere remorse and apology. There was no profound reason for getting violent; I acted impulsively for selfish reasons. I am fully aware that the school regulations prohibit violence in any form, and it is not an acceptable act. Therefore, I understand that there is no room for justification.

I acknowledge that I failed to abide by the basic rules as a middle school student and after deeply reflecting on this matter, I solemnly vow to never make such a mistake again.

I am aware that am still only a middle school student and I will strive to behave in a manner that does not inconvenience the school, but rather reflects positively on its name. I will endeavour to improve my daily life. During the period of detention, I plan to study to improve my English language proficiency. I will not waste the remaining time until graduation, but use it effectively to contemplate and prepare for the future.

Looking ahead, I recognize the importance of my actions on my post-graduation plans. I will re-evaluate my actions to ensure that the efforts I've put in so far won't go to waste. I will strive to graduate with pride, knowing that I have learned from this experience.

I deeply regret betraying the trust and expectations of the teachers who have supported me. I am genuinely sorry. I understand that the trust lost through this incident cannot easily be regained. From now on, I will reflect deeply on my actions and strive every day to live with the right intentions. I sincerely apologize. This incident caused significant inconvenience to my parents, classmates, and teachers, and I understand that my actions are not easily forgiven.

Recently, young people causing disturbances in shops have been a topic of discussion. When encountering such situations involving my peers, I will act responsibly and take the lead in preventing them from causing further disturbances. I will try my best to teach others to behave like good middle school students so that everyone can graduate safely with smiles.

In conclusion, I apologize once again. I am deeply sorry for my actions and their repercussions. I will work to regain the trust of my teachers and peers and ensure that I conduct myself appropriately moving forward."

"What do you think," asked Sayuri, nervously. "Is it good enough?"

"Wow! This is brilliant! Well done, my friend!"

"Thanks, Aya. Your opinion means a lot to me."

Sayuri rushed home straight after school, eager to find a moment alone with her mother. When she entered the house, she found her mom in the kitchen, preparing dinner. The familiar smell of rice emanated from the big rice cooker, and she suspected that her mom was making *nimono*, judging from the strong chicken odour escaping from the pot simmering on the stove.

"Mom, can we talk?" Sayuri said, her voice shaking slightly.

Her mother turned, sensing the gravity in Sayuri's tone. "Of course, sweetheart. What is it? This morning you said it was important. Is it something at school?"

"No, it's not school related," she replied.

Sayuri took a deep breath, "Some men came around to our house yesterday evening while I was home alone. There were two of them. They looked very serious."

Her mother's expression shifted to one of concern, but she maintained her stoic demeanour. "I see," she replied calmly, as if absorbing the weight of Sayuri's words.

"Thank you for telling me. Did they say what they wanted?"

"They said it was a financial matter and that it was urgent. Here...", she said, as she produced a business card and a small envelope from her jacket pocket. "They told me to give this to my parents."

Yoko took the envelope and used a steak knife to open it. Inside was a folded piece of paper. Her face paled as she unfolded the slip of paper and read it carefully.

“What’s wrong, mom? Are you OK?”

Yoko turned to look at her youngest daughter and gently placed her hands on Sayuri’s shoulders.

“I promise you two things. Everything will be OK. And I won’t tell your father that you were the one who told me.”

Sayuri felt a mix of relief and sorrow wash over her. She stepped forward, and they embraced tightly, the warmth of her mother’s presence grounding her amidst the turmoil.

“Thank you, mom. When Dad came home last night... he was drunk again. And I’m worried about him. The Yakuza...”

“Yakuza? What do you mean?”

“No, nothing. I’m just scared. Aya thinks those guys work for the Yakuza.”

Her mother went quiet. She seemed to be in another world, her eyes fixed on a non-existent spot on the wall. As Sayuri observed her, it was if her mom was making an important decision, her eyes steeling with resolve.

“Gaman. This thing too, will pass, Sayuri-chan. Please don’t worry yourself to death about it. It is not your problem – or your fault. It is grown-up stuff. I promise you; all will turn out OK.”

She spoke softly, with no emotion. It reminded Sayuri of the kamikaze pilots she had seen on TV. Duty first. No time for emotion. It was unsettling.

Yoko suddenly forced a smile, “Enough serious talk. How was school today, my dear?”

“It was fine, I guess. I handed the disciplinary letter to Mrs. Matsumoto, my home room teacher. I got a verbal warning. Now I just have to do my detention next week, that’s all. No further action will be taken and nothing will go on my school record.”

“What about Tomoko?”

“I had to stand in front of our class and apologize to her and all the students for my behaviour and had to promise not to be violent again.”

“You may think that your old mother doesn’t understand these things. I do. I was also bullied at school, so I know how stressful and frustrating it can be. But violence is rarely the answer. I learned to use my brain to outsmart the bullies.”

“Really, mom? What did you do?”

“Some other time, Sayuri. It’s not something I am comfortable sharing. But if Tomoko continues to bully you, I want you to tell me first before reacting impulsively, OK?”

“Hai!”

“Thank you, Sayuri-chan.”

“There is one other thing regarding Tomoko,” Sayuri continued, realising that she take advantage of her mother’s current philosophical attitude towards her misdemeanours.

“What is it?”

“Miss Honda, the school counsellor, got back to me about the complaint I made about Tomoko bullying me.”

“Oh! OK. What did she say?” Yoko asked.

“She said that the School Disciplinary Committee will not be taking any action against Tomoko for taunting me.”

“Really? Did she explain why?”

“They never gave her a reason, but Miss Honda confided in me that Tomoko is considered untouchable by the school board as the Mitsui family are their biggest donors and also connected to some very powerful people. She told me not to tell anyone. I haven’t even told Aya. But you are my mother, so I have to tell you.”

“Thank you for trusting me. Unfortunately, this is an all-too-common problem in Japan. The Yakuza and big business work hand in hand and they also have a big influence on who gets elected to school boards. It’s all about the money. Sadly, there is not much anyone can do to change it. I’m sorry, my girl.”

CHAPTER 7

That Friday afternoon, Sayuri walked home alone, bracing herself against the chilly weather, fluffy scarf wrapped around her neck, her backpack slung over one shoulder. Aya had stayed behind for extra-curricular activities, leaving Sayuri to navigate the route alone. The streets were quieter than usual, and she found herself lost in thought, trying to push away the worries of the week.

As she turned a corner, two boys from the nearby high school fell into step beside her. Their laughter was loud and boisterous, but there was something unsettling about their energy. Sayuri recognized them; they were part of a gang known for terrorizing younger students. There were whispers that they had connections to Yakuza members, and her heart raced at the thought.

“Hey, Sayuri!” one of the boys called, flashing a disarming smile that sent a chill down her spine. “Why don’t you come hang out with us at our place?”

“No, thanks,” Sayuri replied, trying to keep her voice steady as she quickened her pace. *How do they know my name?*

The other boy stepped closer, a predatory glint in his eyes. “Aw, come on! It’ll be fun!”

Before she could react, one of them reached out and grabbed her arm forcefully. Panic surged through her as she felt the grip tighten.

“Let go of me!” she shouted, yanking her arm away with all her strength. Without looking back, Sayuri ran as fast as she could, her heart pounding in her chest. She sprinted the rest of the way home, breathless and terrified.

Once inside, she locked the door behind her, leaning against it to catch her breath. She made sure the front door was securely locked and went to her bedroom window to peep between the curtains to see if they had followed her home. She couldn’t see any sign of them. *If they are connected to those Yakuza-looking debt collectors, then they probably know where I live anyway,* she thought.

She was terrified. Home alone – again! But she knew her mom would be home soon. Fridays were easy days for her mom – she currently worked as an ‘Office Lady’ (OL) from 12pm to 5pm on Fridays. She was a contract worker, so she worked for different companies on different days, doing general admin for mid-sized companies. Fortunately, her immediate superior at the temp agency had been at school with her, so she could usually choose assignments that aligned with her family duties. Fifteen minutes later, her mom arrived.

“Konnichiwa, mom. How was your day?” Sayuri bluffed, barely holding a false smile in place.

“Hello, Sayuri-chan! Work was fine. The usual boring paperwork. The only excitement I ever get is family drama,” she attempted to joke, but saw that it had no impact on Sayuri.

“What’s the matter, dear,” she asked, concerned.

There was no way that Sayuri was going to tell her mother about the two boys who harassed her. She was on her own with this one.

“No, nothing mom. I just wanted to ask you if I could go to Aya’s place for half an hour after supper. We need to discuss the upcoming Christmas weekend,” she lied, masking her anxiety with another fake smile.

“Ok, dear. I know it is a Friday night, but don’t stay there too long please. This is not about you. Mr. and Mrs. Tanaka both work on Saturday mornings and go to bed early, so be considerate, OK?”

“Hai. Just 30 minutes, I promise. I don’t have too much homework. I’ll make sure to finish it before I go.”

“That’s a good girl,” she smiled and went off to her bedroom to change into cooking clothes.

Sayuri hurried through her homework, her focus constantly interrupted with thoughts of the two boys. Once she finished, she approached her mother in the kitchen. “Will dad be home soon?” she enquired. “I want to eat before I go to Aya’s house.”

“It is difficult to say exactly when your father will be home. Fridays are unpredictable, as you know. But you know what? We’re not going to wait for him tonight,” she whispered conspiratorially into Sayuri’s ear, like a spy plotting a coup. “Go and set the table and call your sisters – then we can eat.”

“Hai!”

Ten minutes later, she noisily slurped the last bit of ramen into her hungry mouth and quickly washed her dishes. “Is it OK if I go now, please mom?”

Her mother nodded, “Of course, sweetie. Just be careful, okay?”

“Thanks, Mom!” Sayuri called over her shoulder as she grabbed her jacket and headed out again.

When she reached Aya’s house, they settled into Aya’s room, the door closed tight. Words tumbled from Sayuri’s mouth as she relayed the encounter.

“They were so aggressive, Aya. And I think they’re connected to the debt collectors.”

Aya’s eyes widened in fear. “That’s terrible! We have to be more careful. We can’t end up like Junko.”

The mention of Junko sent a shiver down Sayuri’s spine. Junko had been a student in another town that had been kidnapped by some young boys, and the stories surrounding her were haunting.

“We have to stick together,” Sayuri insisted, her voice firm. “Promise me you won’t walk home alone either.”

“I promise,” Aya replied, her expression serious. “Let’s always stay together, especially now.”

They shared a glance of mutual understanding, the weight of their fears binding them closer together. In that moment, they knew they had to watch each other's backs, facing the uncertainties of their world side by side.

"I told my mom that we were going to discuss plans for Christmas, so maybe we should. Then it won't be a lie," suggested Sayuri.

"Hai! I was hoping to get a chance to discuss Christmas plans," Aya responded, smiling.

"What are your parents planning for next weekend? Do you know," enquired Sayuri.

"Hai! My grandparents on my mother's side are coming on Saturday. They live in Ikebukuro, but they might sleep here on Saturday, I'm not sure. My mom is planning a Christmas lunch for our family and her parents. That's it! Nothing special. What is your family planning?"

"Hah! I think my mom does all the planning – no other family involved," Sayuri said facetiously. "I don't know any details, but we usually also just have a family lunch. All my grandparents live in Nagano, so I doubt they will be coming. Probably just the five of us."

"Nagano? Is that where your parents are from originally?" asked Aya.

"Hai! They met at Shinsu University in Nagano. My father studied accounting there," Sayuri replied.

"What was your mother studying?"

"She studied Business Administration, but she never used her degree. They fell in love, got married young and she became a housewife. And then along came Atsuko."

"Interesting. Do you think she believes in *ikigai*?" Aya asked, curious.

"She never talks about those sorts of things. I think she had bigger plans, but I suppose having babies made it impossible," Sayuri pondered. Aya started giggling.

"What's so funny about that?" Sayuri asked, confused.

"Well, I was just thinking – your mom's name is Yoko and Yoko was also John Lennon's wife's name."

"So?"

"Wait. I'll show you," she replied as she stood up and went to her chest of drawers. Sayuri was puzzled. Aya opened the bottom drawer and pulled out her *yume no hon* - a 'dream chart' that many teenagers used to articulate their dreams, career aspirations, personal growth, or relationships.

Aya knelt on the floor of her bedroom, excitement sparkling in her eyes as she unfolded her dream chart. Brightly coloured cutouts and handwritten notes covered the poster board, each representing a piece of her hopes for the future.

“Get off the bed and come kneel next to me!” she urged Sayuri, her voice filled with enthusiasm.

Sayuri slid off the bed and joined Aya on the floor, curiosity piqued. The chart sprawled out before them, a vivid tapestry of aspirations.

“Look at this!” Aya exclaimed, pointing to a cutout from a magazine. It featured a picture of Yoko Ono and John Lennon lying in bed, a serene expression on their faces.

Below the image was a quote from John Lennon: *‘Life is what happens to you while you are busy making other plans.’*

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Aya said, her voice softening. “It reminds me that while we chase our goals, we should also appreciate the moments we’re living.”

Sayuri nodded, captivated. “What else do you have?” she asked, eager to see more.

Aya continued to point out various sections of the chart. “Here are my career aspirations,” she said, indicating a collage of images representing different professions. “I want to be an artist and travel the world, sharing my work. And over here,” she said, gesturing to another section, “are my personal growth goals. I want to learn new languages and volunteer.”

“And what about relationships?” Sayuri inquired, intrigued.

Aya blushed slightly, pointing to a heart-shaped cutout. “I hope to find someone who understands me, someone who will support my dreams. It’s important to have meaningful connections.”

As they shared their thoughts, Sayuri felt a warmth spread through her. Aya’s passion and hope gave her a sense of comfort amid their recent worries.

“This is amazing, Aya,” Sayuri said, her heart swelling with pride for her friend. “You’ve put so much thought into this.”

“Thanks!” Aya smiled, her eyes sparkling. “I just want to keep dreaming big, even with everything going on. We can’t let fear take away our hopes.”

“You’re right, Aya. Overcoming fear is the key to success. Oh! By the way...” Sayuri started.

“Yes?” prodded Aya.

“I asked Atsuko about my early period. She said it is normal at my age, but it can also be affected by stress.”

“Well, that would explain it Sayuri-chan. You have been under a lot of stress lately, my friend,” Aya consoled.

“Hai!” Sayuri agreed.

Together, they sat in the cozy glow of the room, envisioning their futures and silently promising to support each other every step of the way.

CHAPTER 8

The clouds hung low in the sky as Sayuri sat in the detention room, the time slowly ticking away. She neared the end of her hour—one of five she had to serve after the incident with Tomoko. Despite the circumstances, she found comfort in the quietude.

“OK, students,” Mr. Tomodachi announced, breaking the silence. “Those of you who are only doing one hour detention may go now.” A few students perked up, eager to escape. “For the rest of you, I have some good news—you are halfway there!” He flashed a sarcastic smile, and the room filled with groans.

One student muttered, “You are SOOO funny,” earning a chuckle from Sayuri. She packed her *randoseru*, feeling a sense of relief as she gathered her things.

As she made her way to the indoor tennis courts, she reflected on the positives of her situation. With Aya engaged in extra-curricular activities, Sayuri would have had to wait anyway, and the detention provided a peaceful hour to catch up on homework. Plus, any boys from the high school who might have been lurking would likely have given up waiting long before she and Aya walked home.

When Sayuri arrived at the indoor tennis courts, she found Aya finishing her practice. Though Aya wasn’t a great tennis player, she had told her that it was a good way to meet rich boys when she went to university.

“Hey, I’m done!” Aya exclaimed, wiping sweat from her brow as she approached Sayuri. They exchanged cheerful smiles and Aya and Sayuri went to the locker room. Aya didn’t bother with a shower and soon they were walking home together.

“By the way,” Sayuri said, “my mom’s parents are coming to our house for Christmas. It would be nice if you could meet them.”

“That *would* be nice,” Aya replied, her eyes sparkling with interest. “Why don’t we do this - after Christmas lunch, you come over to my house for a short while, and then I’ll come over to yours. You know—just to say hello and maybe swap presents.”

“Yes, I’d like that,” Sayuri said, though a hint of worry crept in. “But I’m afraid everyone is getting homemade presents this year. And I’m sure you know why.”

Aya looked at her and smiled. “It’s not about the presents with me. It’s all about family. Presents are nice and everything, but I would be quite happy if I never have to buy another present again in my life. Think of all the money I could save!” She laughed, and Sayuri felt the warmth of her friend’s spirit.

As they approached the intersection where Sayuri had been harassed, an instinctual alertness washed over her. She noticed four cigarette butts scattered around the base of a corner streetlight, a chilling reminder of that day. She remembered the high school boy smoking, and a wave of unease swept over her, but she said nothing to Aya. They continued home, their steps synchronized, the bond between them solidified by shared experiences and the promise of friendship—even amidst the shadows that loomed in their world.

“Aya...” began Sayuri.

“Yes?”

“Can you come over to my house this afternoon? I am going to make everybody origami presents, but I need your help please. I get stuck on the finer points and I know you are an expert.”

“Expert! Pleeeeezz!” she rolled her eyes at Sayuri. “I’m very average. You just suck!” she giggled as she teased her best friend. “Sure, Sayuri-chan, I will come over a bit later. Ok, here we are at your house. See you soon. Jaa ne.”

“Thank you Aya. See you later. Bye!”

The star projector attached to Sayuri’s bedroom light cast dancing geometric patches of light over the floor where the girls sat surrounded by colourful sheets of paper. They were deeply engrossed in their origami projects, folding and creasing with care. Sayuri concentrated on the simpler designs — cranes and hearts — while Aya tackled the more complicated lotus flowers. The room was filled with laughter and the sound of paper rustling.

“Friday is our last day before winter break. I’m so glad,” Sayuri sighed, her fingers deftly folding a heart. “School gets a bit too much for me sometimes. I’m looking forward to sleeping late.”

“Hah! You wish, Sayuri-chan. You know you’ll get up to help your mom with breakfast. You’d feel too guilty sleeping late,” Aya declared, a teasing smile on her face.

Sayuri chuckled, rolling her eyes. “You know me too well, Aya. It’s a pity we only really became friends after Hana... you know, died.”

A shadow passed over Aya’s face at the mention of Hana. “Yes, you’re a good friend, Sayuri. You actually remind me a lot of Hana.”

“Why do you say that?” Sayuri asked, intrigued.

Aya paused, her expression thoughtful. “She wasn’t as confident as she pretended to be. Hana had the same personality as you, but she dealt with stress in a different way. She used to party hard. I don’t think you can do that. Or want to. You withdraw. You believe in Gaman. She believed in letting off steam. I’m not sure which approach is better—yours or hers.”

Sayuri considered this, her heart heavy with the memory of Hana. “Well, you know what, Aya?” she said, a spark of determination in her voice.

“What?” Aya looked up, curious.

“I have decided that we are going to go out on New Year’s Eve. Just me and you,” Sayuri declared, her eyes shining with excitement.

“Are you serious?” Aya asked incredulously, her hands pausing mid-fold.

“Deadly serious. It’s time. You’re right about me. I’ve been too good all my life, always worried about others — never taking care of number one — me!” Sayuri insisted, her voice rising with conviction.

Aya's face broke into a broad smile. "I like this new Sayuri. Confident and assertive. You go, girl!"

They both laughed, the sound lightening the atmosphere. Sayuri felt a sense of freedom wash over her, as if she were shedding old skin.

"Let's make a pact," Aya suggested, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "No matter what happens, we'll stick together that night. We'll make it memorable!"

"Deal!" Sayuri replied, her heart racing at the thought of their adventure. "I can't wait to see what trouble we get into."

With renewed energy, they returned to their origami, each fold representing a small step toward their plans. As Sayuri crafted a crane, she felt a rush of excitement at the thought of stepping out of her comfort zone.

"Just think," Aya said, her voice playful, "we could end up meeting some cute boys!"

Sayuri laughed, shaking her head. "Let's focus on having fun first. The boys can come later!"

"Right! Fun first!" Aya agreed, their laughter echoing in the cozy room as they continued folding, dreams of the future filling their hearts.

"So, did you party a lot with Hana," Sayuri quizzed.

"Not really. We used to hang out a lot, but my parents are not as lenient as hers are. Besides, I'm wary of getting into bad habits. I must put my studies first. I don't want to disappoint my parents."

"Me too, but school is stressful. Why can't we just read the textbooks and write the exams? I could just study at home and avoid all the drama. I would be a better student, I think," mused Sayuri.

"Yes, that would suit your personality. You are a bit of a loner, aren't you?"

"I am very much a loner, yes. But even loners need at least one friend, even if it just to talk to. I feel lighter whenever I share my troubles with you, Aya. You are a good listener – and that's what I need, someone non-judgemental to just listen to me and support me through difficult times."

"Are you saying that you want a hug?" Aya joked, trying to lighten the sombre mood.

"I told you before, sister! You are on hug rations. One per day!" Sayuri played along.

"Well, that's just too bad. For you – not for me," Aya smiled. "Here are your lotus flowers. I hope you were paying attention because I'm not helping you next year," Aya teased.

"Not even if I hug you?" Sayuri said playfully.

"Mmmmm. OK! But hug first, then fold!"

“Deal!” agreed Sayuri, spitting into her hand and offering it to Aya.

“You learn fast,” laughed Aya. “Alright. Time for me to go. See you tomorrow. I’ll let myself out. You finish your folding. Slow coach!”

“Bye Aya. See you. Thank you for helping!”

CHAPTER 9

The warmth of the *kotatsu* table enveloped the small living room as Sayuri and her family gathered around. Plates of sushi, steaming bowls of miso soup, and platters of fresh fruit adorned the low table. Soft jazz played in the background, a soothing counterpoint to the lively chatter.

Sayuri's two sisters, Atsuko and Keiko, sat cross-legged, carefully unwrapping their gifts. Atsuko's eyes lit up as she revealed a set of beautifully bound books, while Keiko giggled over the quirky socks her grandfather had chosen. Takeshi presented his in-laws with a bottle of fine sake, the amber liquid glinting in the soft light. The grandparents, their faces etched with lines of experience, accepted the gifts with gracious nods, their eyes conveying a lifetime of unspoken stories.

"Oba San, Oji San, these are for you," Sayuri said softly as she presented them with a homemade gift box, which her grandmother slowly opened.

"Sayuri-chan! These are lovely! Arigatou gozaimasu!" as she extracted two perfectly folded origami pieces. "I'll pick first, OK? I want this lotus flower. It's so beautiful. It will complement the flower arrangement on the mantelpiece."

"That's fine, I prefer the crane anyway," Oji San said cheerfully. "Peace, hope and a long life. I'm not sure how much longer, but thank you Sayuri-chan. It is a very thoughtful gift."

As the gift-giving continued, a sense of quiet contentment settled over the room. Sayuri watched as her family members exchanged tokens, their gestures unhurried, their expressions reflecting the simple joys of being together. In these moments, the hustle and bustle of the outside world faded, replaced by the warm embrace of tradition and the enduring bonds of family.

"Oba San, Oji San, thank you for joining us for this special family occasion," said Takeshi. "We are all honoured by your presence," he continued, bowing his head towards them, as they sat side-by-side on the sofa, trays on their laps.

"Thank for inviting us," Oji San replied.

"You don't need an invitation to join us, Oji San. You are the head of this family. You are welcome anytime," Yoko clarified.

"Yes, thank you. I know it has been a few years since we joined your family for Christmas, but it is quite a long trip for us. Your mother is not as active as she used to be since she broke her hip, but she is tired of sitting around the house. She misses all of you. As do I."

"Yes, I decided that if I didn't make the effort this year, it might never happen," Oba San chimed in.

"Are you still gardening, mom?" asked Yoko.

"Yes. Your poor father has to help though. I can't bend down. I suppose you can call me the 'Flower Director'," she cackled, turning to look affectionately at her husband.

“Yes, she sits on her garden stool like an old gnome and bosses me around all afternoon,” he chuckled.

“Hey! I’m not old. I am experienced!” Oba San retorted, as the rest of the family laughed. “Just because I can’t play tennis anymore, doesn’t mean that I’m not useful, you know.”

“You were a great tennis player, mom. I think you won the Nagano Prefecture Cup, didn’t you?” asked Yoko.

“Almost,” beamed Oba San. “I came second to Michiko Shōda.”

“Oh yes! I remember now. You told me once that if you had won that tournament in Karuizawa, you might have been a princess. I never understood then, but now I do,” smiled Yoko.

“Sumimasen, Okaasan, but what do mean by that?” asked Atsuko.

“Well, my dear, my mother played at the same tennis club as Akihito,” explained Yoko.

“Akihito! The new Emperor of Japan!” exclaimed Atsuko in disbelief.

“Yes, that is correct. I had much better legs than Michiko,” insisted Oba San playfully, turning to look at her husband for affirmation.

“Yes, dear. You had the best legs in Nagano. Much better than Michiko,” he said smiling, then putting his hand up to mock shield his mouth as he whispered loudly to the rest of the family, “She makes me say that,” he joked.

“So, we could have been royalty,” mused Keiko. “I think I would have enjoyed that,” she said with a ponderous look on her face.

“Sumimasen, I’m sitting right here,” Oji San reminded them. “None of you would have been born if your mother hadn’t realized that I am twice the man Akihito will ever be,” he stated with mock indignation.

“Yes, Oba San, we believe you,” laughed Keiko. “I didn’t really want to be a princess anyway. So many rules to obey.”

“You are my prince Oji San. You have always treated me like royalty,” Oba San said fondly, laying her hand on top of his.

The scent of savoury dishes lingered in the air as Sayuri finished her Christmas lunch, feeling grateful for the gathering as she listened to her family’s laughter filling the room. She felt a flutter of excitement at the thought of delivering Aya’s present.

“Mom,” Sayuri said, glancing at her mother, Yoko, who was clearing the table, “can I deliver Aya’s present to her?”

Yoko paused, looking thoughtful. “That’s fine, Sayuri, but don’t stay away too long. Your grandparents are visiting for the first time in a few years, and we shouldn’t be disrespectful.”

“Of course, Mom. I promise I won’t be long,” Sayuri replied, a smile spreading across her face. “And Aya will probably come over to greet the grandparents and say hello to the family.”

Yoko nodded, her expression softening. “That will be fine. It’s nice for friends to meet family during the holidays.”

Sayuri thanked her mom and grabbed the neatly wrapped gift and headed out the door, her heart beating with anticipation. The chilly air greeted her as she stepped outside, the sky a soft grey, hinting at the winter chill. As she walked to Aya’s house, she thought about how much she valued their friendship. The recent memories they had created together filled her with warmth, and she couldn’t wait to share the joy of the holiday. Upon reaching Aya’s front door, she knocked lightly, her excitement bubbling over. A moment later, Aya’s mother opened the door, her smile wide and welcoming.

“Sayuri! Happy Christmas!” she exclaimed. “Come in, come in!”

“Thank you! Happy Christmas!” Sayuri responded, stepping inside and unwrapping her fluffy pink scarf from her neck. The warmth of the house enveloped her, filled with the sounds of laughter and the clinking of dishes.

“Aya’s in her room,” her mother said, gesturing toward the hallway. “She’ll be so happy to see you!”

“Here, Mrs. Tanaka, this is for you,” Sayuri said, handing a gift bag to Mrs. Tanaka.

“Oh! Thank you Sayuri San. You really didn’t have to,” she replied.

“It’s nothing special,” she said, knowing that it was just a couple of origami pieces. “I’ll go see Aya in her room now. Thank you, Mrs. Tanaka.”

“Ok. See you.”

“See you.”

Sayuri hurried down the corridor, elated to see her friend. She knocked on Aya’s door, which swung open to reveal her friend beaming.

“Sayuri! You made it!” Aya exclaimed, pulling her into a quick hug. “How was Christmas lunch?”

“Great! But I’m glad to see you now,” Sayuri replied, holding out the gift. “This is for you!”

Aya’s eyes widened in delight as she took the present, her fingers eagerly tearing at the wrapping. “You didn’t have to! But I’m so glad you did!”

Inside was a beautifully handcrafted bracelet, delicate and colourful. Aya gasped, holding it up to the light. “It’s beautiful! Thank you, Sayuri! Did you make this?”

“I’m so happy you like it!” Sayuri said, her smile brightening. “Yes, it’s a project I have been working on. I thought it would be perfect for you.”

As they admired the bracelet together, the sound of laughter echoed from the living room. “Have you got guests?” Sayuri asked, glancing toward the sound.

“Yes, just my father’s parents. They also live in Tokyo, so it is not too difficult for them to visit. My grandfather is so funny. He has a good sense of humour. My grandmother pretends that she doesn’t like his jokes, but she really does. They are so cute.”

“Let’s go greet them!” Sayuri suggested, excitement sparkling in her eyes. “I’d love to meet your family!” Aya nodded, her heart swelling with gratitude for having such a supportive friend. “Okay! Let’s go!” They made their way to the living room, where Aya’s grandparents were seated, sharing laughter with her parents.

“Sayuri, you know everyone here except Oba San and Oji San, my grandparents.” Aya introduced her friend, beaming with pride. “Everyone, this is my good friend, Sayuri. We go to school together. She’s also a neighbour.”

“Nice to meet you, Sayuri!” her grandparents said in unison, their smiles wide.

“Thank you! It’s so lovely to meet you!” Sayuri replied, her voice bright and genuine.

“Sayuri San, please have some cake and something to drink,” offered Akiko Tanaka, Aya’s mom.

“Thank you, Mrs. Tanaka, I’ll just have a small piece of cake, thank you. And a glass of coke, no ice, please.”

As the evening unfolded, the room filled with stories, laughter, and the spirit of the holiday, Sayuri felt a deep sense of belonging. With Aya by her side, the warmth of friendship blended seamlessly with family, making this Christmas one she would cherish forever.

Aya’s grandfather, a kindly man with silver hair and twinkling eyes, turned his attention to the girls. “Aya, dear, is your friend Hana coming to join us today?” His tone was cheerful, but the question hung heavy in the air.

Sayuri’s heart sank at the mention of Hana. She exchanged a quick glance with Aya, who shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Aya’s expression was a mixture of surprise and tension, as if the question had caught her off guard.

“Hana...” Aya began, her voice faltering. Memories of her troubled friend flooded back, and she struggled to find the right words. How could she explain the painful truth?

“Is she busy?” her grandfather prompted gently, sensing the hesitation.

Sayuri felt the weight of the moment, wishing she could ease Aya’s discomfort.

“Actually, Hana... she’s not with us anymore,” Sayuri said softly, taking a risk to protect her friend.

Aya’s eyes widened, gratitude flashing across her face. “Yeah, she... she passed away earlier this year,” she added, her voice trembling slightly. The room fell silent, the joy of the celebration momentarily overshadowed by the revelation. Aya’s grandfather blinked, processing the news. “Oh... I’m so sorry to hear that,” he finally said, his voice filled with compassion. “I didn’t know.”

A heavy silence settled over them, and Sayuri felt the atmosphere shift. She could see the pain etched on Aya's face, the struggle to reconcile her memories of Hana with the reality of their loss.

"I... I didn't know how to tell you," Aya admitted, her eyes glistening. "It's been a difficult time."

Her grandfather reached out, placing a comforting hand on Aya's shoulder. "It's okay, my dear. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. Just know that we're here for you."

Sayuri felt a swell of admiration for Aya's grandfather. He always seemed to know the right thing to say, providing a safe space for his family to express their feelings.

Aya took a deep breath, visibly relieved by her grandfather's understanding. "Thank you," she whispered, a small smile breaking through her sadness. "I just miss her sometimes, you know?"

"I can only imagine," he replied gently. "Hana must have been very special to you."

"She was," Aya said, her voice steadying. "We had some great times together."

Sayuri reached out and squeezed Aya's hand, offering her silent support. "And we'll always remember her," Sayuri added, her heart aching for the loss they shared.

"Absolutely," Aya's grandfather agreed. "It's important to hold on to those memories. They keep our loved ones alive in our hearts."

As they sat together in the cozy living room, wrapped in the warmth of family and friendship, Sayuri felt a sense of unity. They may have lost Hana, but the love they held for her remained, intertwining their lives in ways that would continue to grow, even in her absence.

"More sake, Oji San?" Akiko asked, trying to deflect the conversation away from death.

"Hai!" he accepted, holding out his glass to be refilled, ignoring the stern looks of his long-suffering wife.

Sayuri laughed at a very old joke that Aya's well-lubricated grandfather attempted to tell, but got the punchline wrong.

I guess that's the beauty of being old, thought Sayuri to herself, *nobody dares to correct you,* she grinned, wondering if she would ever get to see old age. When she looked at how slow and wrinkled old people were, she doubted that she even wanted to get to that stage. *Sixty seems like a good time to die,* she decided.

"Sayuri! Helloooo!"

It was Aya. Sayuri snapped out of her pensive trance and realized, to her horror, that everyone in the room was looking at her.

"I'm sorry. Did you say something?" she asked meekly, looking like a rabbit caught in a spotlight.

“My grandmother was just asking you how you are enjoying middle school.”

“Sumimasen! I was just thinking that I have overstayed my welcome and that my mom is expecting us soon,” she lied. Then, turning to face Aya’s grandmother, “Oba San, I like school very much, thank you,” compounding the lie.

“It has been wonderful to meet you both, but my mother is expecting Aya and I. She is probably about to phone here and ask where I am. I really must go. Sorry.”

“Don’t be silly, dear,” Akiko said kindly. “We are really grateful that you shared some time with us on Christmas weekend. You and Aya run along now. Thank you for joining us. See you soon. Jaa ne.”

Sayuri bowed her head in deference to the grandparents, “Arigatou gozaimasu!”

“Ki o tsukete!” came the reply.

“Oh! You’re back!” exclaimed Yoko as Sayuri and Aya entered the living room. “Welcome, Aya. It’s good to see you again. Please sit. Can I get you something to eat?”

“Thank you Okaasan. It is good to see you too. I really don’t think I can eat or drink anymore. I will just have a glass of water please, thank you.”

“Ok, I’ll bring it now.”

“Aya, these are my grandparents,” Sayuri said, looking in the direction of where Oba San and Oji San were seated.

“Konnichiwa, Obaasan, Konnichiwa, Ojiisan,” greeted Aya, bowing slightly in respect.

“Konnichiwa, Aya San,” they greeted back, smiling. “Are you two at school together?” asked Ojiisan.

“Hai!” replied Aya. “Sayuri is my best friend. She lives nearby,” Aya replied, turning to Sayuri and winking.

“This is for you,” Aya said, handing a gift bag to Oba San.

“Arigatou gozaimasu”, she said, taking the bag from Aya. “Can I open it now?”

“Hai!” Aya nodded.

She dipped her hand into the bag and pulled out a gift-wrapped box of matcha tea. “Oh! Just what I needed!” she exclaimed, beaming. “That was very thoughtful of you, Aya San. “Arigatou gozaimasu,” she repeated.

“I’m glad you like it, Oba San,” said Aya, smiling.

CHAPTER 10

The bustling streets of Shibuya were alive with energy as Sayuri walked through the crowd, her heart pounding with both hope and anxiety. She had spent the entire morning searching for a part-time job, determined to find work for the next two weeks. Her family needed the financial support, and she wanted to save a little for herself—specifically, for a cute outfit to wear when she went clubbing with Aya on New Year’s Eve.

As she strolled past shops and restaurants, her spirits began to wane. Each place she entered seemed to have already filled their positions or wasn’t hiring at all. The excitement of the holiday season felt like a double-edged sword; the festive lights and cheerful decorations only reminded her of her own growing despair.

“Maybe this was a bad idea,” she muttered to herself, her shoulders slumping. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows on the pavement, mirroring her waning hope. Just as she was about to give up, she spotted a KFC franchise across the street, the familiar red and white sign standing out against the grey buildings. With a deep breath, Sayuri crossed the street and pushed open the door. The aroma of fried chicken wafted toward her, mixing with the sounds of laughter and chatter from customers enjoying their meals. She approached the counter nervously.

“Excuse me,” she said to the cashier, who looked up with a friendly smile. “Do you know if you have any part-time jobs available?”

The cashier nodded and called over the manager, a middle-aged woman with a warm demeanour. “What can I help you with?” the manager asked, her tone inviting.

Sayuri straightened her posture, trying to sound confident. “I’m looking for a part-time job for the next two weeks. Any chance you’re hiring?”

The manager’s eyes lit up. “Actually, your timing is perfect! Our Dining Area Maintenance worker just went away on vacation with her parents for the holidays, and we need someone to fill in. If you’re willing to work just for two weeks, that would be ideal for everyone.”

Sayuri’s heart leaped at the prospect. “Really? That sounds great!”

The manager smiled. “Wonderful! It’s mostly cleaning tables and maintaining the dining area, but it’s a fun environment. Are you okay with that?”

“Absolutely,” Sayuri replied, her enthusiasm bubbling over.

“Perfect! Let’s get you filled in on some paperwork, and I’ll show you around,” the manager said, motioning for Sayuri to follow her. As they walked through the restaurant, Sayuri felt a wave of relief wash over her. This job would not only help her family but also give her the chance to earn some money for the cute outfit she envisioned for New Year’s Eve.

I can’t believe this is happening, she thought, a smile breaking across her face. *Maybe this year will end on a high note after all,* she thought, enthusiastic about the possibilities that lay beyond the holiday season.

“Is it OK, if I fill in the paperwork only today and then start tomorrow morning? I would start right away, but I really should just check with my mother first. She worries about me,” Sayuri asked the manageress once the job had been explained to her.

“Of course. I understand. My mother is the same. We are OK for night shift anyway, so it doesn’t make any difference. But I will be honest with you – if you don’t arrive for your shift tomorrow morning, I’m afraid I can’t keep the position open for you. Business comes first. Understood?”

“Hai!”

“Good. We open at 10am, but you must please be here by 9am to help get ready for opening. I can see more or less what size you are. I will make sure that I have a staff uniform ready for you before tomorrow. Any questions?”

“Just one. What does the job pay and do I get paid daily or weekly?”

“The hourly rate for your position is 800 yen. If you were full time, it would be more. Staff get paid cash every Friday.”

“That sounds great,” Sayuri said enthusiastically. “Sumimasen, just one more question that I have just thought of. Am I allowed to work double-shifts?”

“Well, we don’t usually need our staff to work double-shifts unless a staff member doesn’t show up for work. So, I can’t promise you anything. But I will put you on standby if you want.”

“OK. I understand. Arigatou gozaimasu!” she said as she bowed her head slightly in gratitude.

Sayuri burst through the front door of her home, unable to contain her excitement. The smell of home-cooked food wafted through the air, and she couldn’t wait to share her news with her mother.

“Mom! I got a job!” she called out, her voice bubbling with enthusiasm.

Yoko emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dish towel.

“Really? That’s wonderful, Sayuri! Where?”

“At KFC near Shibuya station! I’ll be working during the school break,” Sayuri explained, her eyes shining. “It’s only dayshift, but I might have to work double shifts if they’re short-staffed.”

Yoko’s expression shifted to one of concern. “Double shifts? Are you sure you can handle that on top of your schoolwork?”

“I can, Mom! It’s just for two weeks, and I really want to help out,” Sayuri replied earnestly, her determination clear. “You know that I am a good student. I promise I will study extra hard in my free time.”

After a moment's hesitation, Yoko nodded, a reluctant smile creeping onto her face. "Alright, if you think you can manage it, I support you. Just remember to take care of yourself, okay?"

"I will! Thank you, Mom!" Sayuri exclaimed, feeling a wave of relief and joy. "Can I please phone Aya and tell her?"

"Sure Sayuri-chan."

"Thanks, mom!"

Sayuri picked up the house landline and dialed Aya's number, anticipation bubbling inside her. After a few rings, Aya's cheerful voice came through the receiver.

"Tanaka residence. How can I help you?" Aya answered, her tone bright and playful.

"Aya! It's Sayuri!" she exclaimed, unable to contain her enthusiasm. "Guess what? I got a job at KFC!"

There was a brief pause, then Aya's excitement burst through. "No way! Are you serious? That's amazing!"

"Yeah! I'm so excited. I'll be working during the school break, and it's only dayshift, but I might have to do double shifts sometimes," Sayuri explained, her voice bubbling with joy.

"That's so cool, Sayuri! I knew you could do it!" Aya replied, her encouragement filling Sayuri with warmth. "But I'll miss hanging out with you during the break. I know you need to work, though. I get it," Aya continued.

"Thanks, Aya! You're the best!" Sayuri said, her heart soaring as they chatted about her new opportunity. She felt grateful to have a friend who celebrated her successes, making the moment even more special.

"But wait, what about New Year's Eve? Will you still be able to go out?" asked Aya anxiously.

"Let me come around to your place tomorrow night after work and we can discuss it, OK?"

"Oh, yes, of course. I know what you mean – the walls have ears," she said in a hushed voice.

"Exactly. I finish at 5pm, so I will come as soon as I can after that, OK?"

"Ok. See you tomorrow!"

As Sayuri headed to her room, she felt a sense of pride swell within her. Her mother's approval meant everything, and she could sense that Yoko was secretly proud of her growing maturity and responsibility.

I can do this, Sayuri thought, her resolve strengthening. *I'll work hard, help my family, and still enjoy my time with Aya.* With a renewed sense of purpose, she began to

plan how she would balance her responsibilities and make the most of the holiday season ahead.

Sayuri burst into Aya's room, her face flushed with excitement after her first day at KFC. Aya was sprawled on her bed, flipping through a copy of Shojo Comic, and she looked up with a grin.

"Hey, you! How was your first day?" Aya asked, her curiosity piqued.

"It was so busy!" Sayuri exclaimed, plopping down on the floor next to Aya. "I had to work really fast clearing tables and cleaning up spills. The seating area was packed the whole time!"

"Wow, that sounds intense!" Aya replied, leaning forward. "How was the food?"

"Pretty good! I only got a 30-minute break for lunch, but at least I got to eat for free," Sayuri said, a satisfied smile crossing her face. "It's tiring, but not too difficult. I think I can handle it."

Aya chuckled. "If you did some extra-curricular sports at school, you'd be in better shape for all that running around!"

Sayuri laughed, shaking her head. "That will never happen. I'll stick with my KFC workouts for now!"

"I'll miss you these next couple of weeks, but I'll be thinking of you," stated Sayuri seriously. "But I can't let my family down, you know."

"Totally. I'll spend my time studying and getting ready for the last semester of middle school. We still have New Year's Eve," Aya suggested.

"Hai! We should start planning."

They shifted their focus to the upcoming New Year's Eve outing. Aya's eyes sparkled with excitement. "So, I know New Year's Eve is officially only on Monday, but Saturday is close enough. It's the best time for clubbing!"

"Where should we go?" Sayuri asked, her interest piqued.

Aya thought for a moment. "Do you know Megumi? That girl in our class? She told me that her sister went to a new place in Shibuya called CAVE. Have you heard of it?"

Sayuri shook her head. "No, I haven't. Shall we go there?"

"Sure! I'm happy to go anywhere," Aya said.

"But how will we get in? We're underage," Sayuri fretted.

"Mmm. That could be tricky," Aya mused. "But I've heard that they're not too strict if you dress *kawaii*!"

Sayuri's eyes lit up. "OK! I've always wanted to dress up *kawaii* and go party. I'm so happy! I think that when I finish work at 5 PM on Friday, we should go shopping for

clothes. I'll have my weekly pay by then. It gives us three hours to shop for clothes. But I don't want to spend too much money. I still have to give money to my mom to help out. OK?"

"That's a good idea!" Aya agreed. "But you should come over to my house tomorrow to try on some of my clothes first. If you can't find anything you like, then we'll go shopping on Friday evening."

Sayuri smiled, feeling grateful for Aya's support. "That sounds like a great plan! I can't wait to try on your clothes."

As they continued chatting and planning, the excitement for their New Year's Eve adventure grew. Sayuri felt a rush of happiness, knowing that she could balance her new job while still enjoying precious moments with her best friend. She eagerly anticipated the celebration that lay ahead.

Sayuri stood in front of the mirror in Aya's room, surrounded by a sea of colourful clothes strewn across the floor. The excitement of New Year's Eve was palpable as she rummaged through Aya's collection, determined to find the perfect outfit.

"Okay, first up!" Aya announced, holding up a vibrant red mini dress adorned with a cute white bow at the collar. "This one screams *party!*"

Sayuri slipped it on, twirling in front of the mirror. The dress hugged her curves and flared out at the hem. "What do you think?" she asked, giving a playful spin.

Aya's eyes sparkled. "You look adorable! But I think it's a bit too formal for clubbing. We need something more fun!"

With a nod, Sayuri changed into a bright yellow crop top paired with high-waisted denim shorts. The top had frilly sleeves that added a playful touch. "How about this?"

Aya clapped her hands excitedly. "Yes! That's so cute! But I feel like it could use a little more flair. Do you have any accessories?"

Sayuri fished through a small box of Aya's jewellery and pulled out a chunky beaded necklace. She put it on and glanced at the mirror again. "What do you think now?"

"Perfect!" Aya grinned. "You look like you're ready to dance! But we might want to switch the shorts for something a bit more festive."

Sayuri sighed playfully and swapped out the shorts for a sparkly silver mini skirt that glimmered under the light. "This is definitely more festive," she said, adjusting the waistband.

"Now we're talking!" Aya cheered. "With that top and skirt combo, you'll be the belle of the ball! Just wait until you add some cute tights and those platform shoes of mine." Sayuri laughed, slipping on the platforms and wobbling slightly. "These are so high! I'll probably trip over my own feet!"

"Just practice walking in them!" Aya replied, giggling. "You'll get the hang of it. Okay, next outfit!"

Next, Sayuri tried on a playful pastel pink overall dress with a white turtleneck underneath. “This feels a bit too casual,” she said, looking at herself with a furrowed brow.

Aya tilted her head, considering. “It’s super cute, but I think you’ll want something that stands out more at the club. Maybe something bolder?”

“Good point,” Sayuri agreed, quickly changing again. She pulled on a black leather jacket over a lace tank top, paired with a plaid skirt that flared out. The outfit felt edgy and fun.

“Now that’s what I’m talking about!” Aya exclaimed, clapping her hands. “You look like a rockstar! That’ll turn heads for sure.”

Sayuri grinned, feeling confident. “I love it! This could be the one!”

“Definitely! Just add some bold makeup and you’ll be ready to own the dance floor,” Aya suggested, her eyes gleaming with excitement.

As Sayuri admired her reflection, she felt a rush of anticipation for their night out. She turned to Aya, a smile spreading across her face. “Thanks for letting me try all this on! I’m so excited for New Year’s Eve!”

“Me too! We’re going to have the best time,” Aya replied, her enthusiasm infectious. “Now, let’s plan our makeup and hair to match these outfits!”

With laughter and chatter, the two friends dove into their plans, the spirit of celebration igniting their imaginations for the night ahead.

CHAPTER 11

The neon lights of Shibuya glowed vibrantly as Sayuri and Aya stepped onto the bustling streets, ready to embrace the evening. The air was crisp, filled with excitement as they made their way toward Centre Gai, the heart of youth culture.

“You know, Aya, this is the first time I have ever been out at night without my parents. It’s a little bit scary, but I feel so free! I could get used to this.”

“Calm down, sister!” laughed Aya. “It always feels good the first time. Please don’t get used to it. We must finish high school first. Gaman.”

“Yes, you’re right Aya. I guess I am a little overexcited.”

“Well, excitement is the plan for tonight, my friend. But a new year is starting and then we must focus on our studies. Think of tonight as a reward for all the hard work you have put in this year.”

“No. I’d rather think of it as a way to let off steam. It has been a stressful year. I could never have managed without you. Thank you, Aya,” Sayuri said, turning to face her friend, who she thought looked very *kawaii* tonight, in her oversized Milk pastel baby blue sweater adorned with whimsical red hearts. It was slightly cropped, ideal for showing off her high-waisted bottoms.

Her red and black high-waisted plaid mini skirt added a fun, youthful touch, and the skirt’s length was just perfect for dancing, although Sayuri wasn’t sure if Aya’s chunky white platform sneakers were. Aya’s hair was tied in a side ponytail with colourful scrunchies and large hoop earrings and a few layered beaded necklaces added extra flair, along with a playful charm bracelet. To keep warm, she wore a cropped denim jacket adorned with a patch from her favourite band, B’z.

“Friends for life!” exclaimed Aya, giving Sayuri an impulsive hug.

“Hey! Easy on the hugging,” protested Sayuri playfully.

“Look at all the people!” Sayuri exclaimed, her eyes wide with wonder. They strolled up the pedestrian-only street, surrounded by small shops and cafes buzzing with energy. Street performers entertained passersby, adding to the lively atmosphere.

“Let’s find a good spot to people-watch,” Aya suggested, pulling Sayuri toward a bench. They settled in, giggling as they observed the eclectic mix of fashion styles around them. A group of teens in oversized jackets and colourful hair passed by, while another group sported the latest in Japanese streetwear.

“Look at that guy! His pants are so baggy, they look like parachutes!” Sayuri laughed, pointing discreetly.

“Right? And that girl’s platform shoes are almost as tall as my waist!” Aya replied, her eyes sparkling. They spent a good half hour joking and chatting, soaking in the vibrant energy of the scene.

“Do you think I’m dressed kawaii enough, Aya?” Sayuri asked, a hint of doubt creeping into her voice.

“Of course, Sayuri! You’re wearing *my* clothes! I’ll tell you what. Let’s go find a *purikura* and then you can see for yourself. OK?”

“OK! That sounds like fun! There should be one nearby. Let’s go look.”

Aya and Sayuri wandered through the bustling streets of Shibuya, their excitement palpable as they searched for the perfect *purikura* booth. The neon lights illuminated their faces, and the sound of laughter filled the air.

“There it is!” Sayuri exclaimed, pointing to a brightly decorated *purikura* shop with colourful posters of cute, oversized stickers. They hurried inside, the familiar scent of sweet snacks and the sound of cheerful music welcoming them. As they stepped into the booth, they giggled, trying to figure out how it worked. A screen lit up, prompting them to choose a background.

“Let’s go with the sparkly hearts!” Aya suggested, her eyes twinkling.

“Perfect!” Sayuri agreed, pressing the button. They struck their first pose, squeezing close together and flashing peace signs. “One, two, three!”

The camera clicked, capturing their playful expressions. “Let’s do something silly next!” Aya said, making a goofy face while sticking out her tongue. Sayuri burst into laughter, trying to mimic Aya’s pose. “I can’t hold it!” she squealed, collapsing into giggles as the camera captured their fun.

“Okay, serious face now!” Aya said dramatically, attempting to strike a pose like a model. Sayuri joined in, puffing out her cheeks and crossing her arms. The camera clicked again, preserving their ridiculous “serious” expressions. After several more poses—one with them wearing oversized sunglasses and another where they pretended to be holding imaginary microphones—the photo session ended. They leaned against the wall, breathless from laughter.

“I can’t wait to see how these turn out!” Sayuri said, her cheeks flushed with joy.

“Me too! We’re going to look so cute!” Aya replied, her excitement bubbling over.

When the pictures finally appeared, they squealed in delight, each shot more ridiculous than the last.

“Look at this one! We look like dorks!” Sayuri said, holding up a photo where they both had exaggerated expressions.

“Dorky but adorable!” Aya replied, grinning. “Let’s decorate them with stickers!”

With a new burst of creativity, they spent the next few minutes adding colourful stickers and captions, sealing their memories in the most *kawaii* way possible. As they left the booth, the warmth of friendship and laughter filled the air, making the night in Shibuya even more special.

“I do look very cute, don’t I?” Sayuri mused as she studied the photos closely.

“I’m sure that was a rhetorical question, *baka*,” she laughed.

“Oh, I see! You’re doing a mirror, mirror on the wall scene...!” Aya mocked. “What happened to the shy, quiet Sayuri I used to know so well?” Aya said theatrically, rolling her eyes.

“Tonight, I am Cinderella!” announced Sayuri, as she did a twirl, spinning joyfully, her skirt billowing out in a colourful swirl as she twirled for Aya. With each rotation, the fabric danced around her, momentarily lifting to reveal her vibrant green leggings underneath. The bright tights contrasted beautifully with the skirt, adding a playful flair to her movements.

Just as she was caught up in the joy of the moment, Sayuri's foot caught on the edge of the platform shoes she borrowed from Aya. With a startled gasp, she stumbled slightly, her balance wavering. The twirl turned into a wobbly pirouette as she tried to regain her footing, laughter bubbling from her lips despite the near mishap. Aya rushed forward, a mix of concern and amusement on her face, ready to catch her friend as Sayuri giggled, the moment turning into a delightful blend of excitement and friendship.

Afterward, they headed to one of Shibuya's popular game centres, the bright lights and sounds of arcade machines welcoming them in. Soon, they were challenging each other in a classic game of Pac-Man, their laughter echoing as they competed for high scores.

“I’m going to get you!” Sayuri challenged, her fingers flying over the buttons.

“No chance, Cinderella!” declared Aya, as her Pacman ate the last Blinky. “High score! Woo-hoo!”

“You were lucky,” said Sayuri with a mock sulky face. “Just wait. Next time you are toast.”

“That was fun, but we need to refuel before we try to get into CAVE,” Aya said, glancing at her watch. “I’m starving!”

They wandered into a cozy ramen shop nearby, the warm steam rising from bowls of noodles making their mouths water. After ordering two steaming bowls of miso ramen, they slurped their noodles happily, sharing stories and laughing between bites.

“This is so good! We should come here more often,” Sayuri said, savouring her meal.

“But is it finger-licking-good?” laughed Aya.

“I’m sure I’ll never eat chicken again once my part time job is over,” smiled Sayuri.

“Ramen is the perfect fuel for our big night out,” Aya replied, wiping her mouth with a grin.

With their bellies full, they continued wandering the streets of Shibuya.

“Let’s do this!” Aya exclaimed, excitement bubbling in her voice, as they passed a karaoke bar, the sound of cheerful singing spilling out into the street. “Let’s go inside!”

“Really?” asked Sayuri, silently pleading that she did not have to sing.

“Come on. It’ll be fun!” insisted Aya. Nobody knows you here. Or anywhere in Japan for that matter. And you’ll probably never return. So, make an exception, Cinderella. Please!”

Sayuri digested Aya’s words, straightened her posture and poked her chin in the air and replied, “You’re right, Aya. Tonight is my night!”

Inside, they grabbed a private room and flipped through the songbook. “What should we sing first?” Sayuri asked, her eyes scanning the options.

“Let’s do something nostalgic! How about *I Want to Break Free* by Queen?” Aya suggested, grinning.

They took turns belting out the lyrics, their voices mingling with laughter and occasional off-key notes. “We sound amazing!” Sayuri declared dramatically, striking a pose with a microphone in hand.

After a couple of songs, they finally decided it was time to head to CAVE. “Are you ready for this?” Aya asked, her eyes glinting with mischief.

“Ready as I’ll ever be! Let’s see if they let us in,” Sayuri replied, her heart beating fast with anticipation.

As they stepped back into the lively streets of Shibuya, they felt the thrill of the night ahead, their friendship stronger than ever as they prepared to dive into the adventure of clubbing — underage, but full of dreams, laughter and determination.

The neon lights of CAVE nightclub pulsed in vibrant colours as Aya and Sayuri stood in the queue, excitement and nerves swirling between them. The music thumped in the background, a tantalizing taste of what awaited them inside.

As they approached the entrance, the doorman—a massive figure in a black suit—loomed over them, arms crossed and expression unyielding. His presence alone made Sayuri’s heart race, a mix of thrill and apprehension.

“Hey, how old are you girls?” the doorman asked, his voice booming.

“I’m 20!” Aya declared confidently, her makeup enhancing her features and giving her a more mature appearance. The doorman squinted but nodded, seemingly accepting her answer.

Sayuri, however, felt the weight of his gaze on her. She fidgeted, her confidence draining away. “Uh, I’m... I’m...” she stammered, but the words wouldn’t come out right. The doorman raised an eyebrow, already sensing her hesitation.

“You’re not 20, are you?” he said, shaking his head. “You can’t come in.”

Sayuri’s heart sank. Aya started to speak, “But...” she began, but the doorman’s expression was firm. Aya looked at Sayuri, their excitement deflating like a balloon. Together, they turned to walk away, disappointment heavy in their steps.

Just then, a man around 40 emerged from a sleek black limo parked nearby. He was sharp-dressed and exuded an air of confidence. He noticed Sayuri's downcast expression and the verbal exchange between the girls and the doorman.

"Hey, they're with me," he said, stepping forward. The doorman glanced at him, then back at the girls, unsure.

Ken Watanabe—though they wouldn't know it yet—had an aura that commanded attention. His eyes lingered on Sayuri, who looked particularly cute in her *kawaii* outfit, her big brown eyes wide with a mix of shyness and curiosity. The doorman hesitated, then stepped aside.

"Hai! Oyabun!"

Ken smiled, looking directly at Sayuri. "Don't worry, it will be fine. Come on in."

He gestured for them to follow him, as they walked side-by-side down the narrow passage that led to the B1 dance floor, leaving Aya to tag along behind in silence. Once inside the cavernous space, the thumping music enveloped them, and the atmosphere buzzed with energy. Aya's eyes sparkled with excitement as she took in the vibrant crowd. Ken led them deeper into the club, and soon he excused himself to head to the VIP section, leaving Aya and Sayuri on the dance floor.

"Did that just happen?" Sayuri asked, still in a daze.

"He's so cool!" Aya exclaimed, her face flushed with excitement. "Let's dance!"

As Takuya Kusajima, the new young DJ, dropped the next track, Aya lost herself in the rhythm, her hips swaying as she raised her hands above her head, then said, "Hey! We saved all our entrance money! Let's get a drink!"

Sayuri, however, felt the weight of responsibility. "I can't drink," she said, shaking her head. "I have work tomorrow."

"Just one drink won't hurt!" Aya insisted, already feeling the effects of the alcohol. "You'll have fun, I promise!"

"No Aya. I'm going to stick to Coke."

"Party pooper!" Aya teased, just before taking a big sip of her sour cocktail."

As the night wore on, the music pulsed around them as they boogied on the dance floor together. Shortly before midnight, Ken returned, his eyes searching for Sayuri.

He approached her with a charming smile. "Would you like to dance?" he asked, his voice smooth. Sayuri hesitated. She felt nervous and clumsy, but the way he looked at her made her heart flutter. She glanced at Aya, who was now tipsy and waving her hand as if to say, "Go for it!"

With a deep breath, Sayuri nodded. "Okay," she replied, anxiously. As they danced, Ken introduced himself.

"I'm Ken Watanabe. It's nice to meet you."

“Sayuri,” she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. She felt shy under his gaze but couldn’t help but be drawn in by his confidence.

“You have a lovely smile,” he said, boosting her ego. Sayuri blushed, grateful for the compliment, despite the age difference. He was charming and rich-looking, making her feel special. After a few dances, Ken offered to buy them drinks. “Come to the VIP section with me,” he suggested. Aya’s eyes lit up with excitement, her tipsy bravado shining through.

“Sayuri, let’s go!” Aya pleaded.

“I really should go home soon,” Sayuri said, glancing at her watch. “I have work tomorrow, and I promised my parents...”

“Just for a little while! You can have one drink!” Aya insisted, her enthusiasm infectious. Sayuri sighed, feeling the pull of her responsibilities but also the thrill of the moment. “Okay, but I really have to leave in 30 minutes.”

Aya beamed, leading the way toward the VIP section. But as they got closer, Sayuri froze.

“What’s wrong?” Aya asked, noticing her sudden stillness.

“I... I recognize him,” Sayuri stammered, her heart racing. She pointed across the room at a man sitting in the VIP section. “He’s one of the debt collectors who came to my house!”

Aya frowned, trying to reassure her. “He probably won’t recognize you. You look totally different dressed up like this.”

“No, I can’t,” Sayuri said, her voice shaking. Panic flooded her as she stepped back, unsure of how to react.

“Wait here! I’ll be back soon,” Aya said, her voice slightly slurred from the drinks. She squeezed Sayuri’s shoulder before heading toward the VIP area.

Sayuri felt lost and alone as she watched Aya walk away. She glanced at her watch—it was already past midnight. The club was alive with lights and sounds, but she felt like she was in a bubble, separate from it all. As she stood there, she watched as Ken led Aya onto the dance floor, their bodies moving rhythmically to the music. Sayuri’s heart sank as she realized how far away her friend was getting. She could see Aya laughing and leaning into Ken, the carefree joy of the moment contrasting sharply with Sayuri’s anxiety.

Taking a deep breath, Sayuri knew she had to leave. It was her Cinderella moment. She approached Aya on the dance floor, her heart pounding. “Aya, it’s time to go!” she called out, her voice barely heard over the music.

Aya turned, her expression slightly confused. “But I’m having fun!” she protested, swaying slightly.

“Please, we need to go. I have work tomorrow,” Sayuri insisted, her tone firm but pleading.

“Just a few more minutes?” Aya asked, her eyes sparkling with tipsy excitement.

“No, now!” Sayuri said, her patience wearing thin.

CHAPTER 12

Sayuri started clearing the table as soon as the customers stood up to go, the smell of fried chicken filling the air. Sunday was always a busy day and a family of four was already approaching the recently vacated table.

"Konnichiwa. Welcome to KFC, sir. Please allow me a few seconds to prepare your table for you," she said to the father politely as she quickly wiped the table down and rearranged the condiments in their prescribed order, as her mind wandered back to Aya.

Despite the familiar surroundings, she felt an unusual heaviness in her chest. The bright fluorescent lights above her felt harsh, and the laughter of customers seemed distant. The excitement of the previous night had faded, replaced by a dull ache of disappointment.

"Sumimasen!" she cried, as she absentmindedly bumped into the father as she completed her table cleaning and turned to rinse her cloth in the yellow combo mop bucket that accompanied her at all times.

"Please forgive me, sir! I am so sorry! Are you OK?"

Annoyed, the father made a visible effort to remain calm and patient and merely said, "Don't worry about it," a forced smile on his face, as he sat down with his wife and 2 kids.

Sayuri-san, you must focus on your job. You're going to get fired, she berated herself. But it was in vain. Aya's betrayal stung, and she found herself replaying the events over and over in her mind as she completed her shift. She wasn't sure how to handle the situation. Aya was her best friend. She had been certain that Aya would always be there for her, as she had promised many times, but now, the trust was gone.

How could she abandon me like that? Sayuri thought, disappointed in her best friend.

They had promised each other they would stick together, especially in a place like CAVE. Yet, Aya had gotten swept up in the moment, leaving Sayuri to navigate the chaos alone. Feeling abandoned, Sayuri's heart sank as she pushed her mop bucket half-heartedly across to the next empty table.

Just then, the bell above the door jingled, breaking her thoughts. Sayuri looked up and froze. There was Aya, looking forlorn and visibly hungover, her eyes slightly bloodshot. She shuffled in, a guilty expression on her face.

"Hey, Sayuri," Aya mumbled, her voice raspy as she approached. Sayuri's stomach twisted at the sight of her friend.

"Hi," Sayuri replied, trying to keep her tone neutral. She busied herself with a few napkins, avoiding eye contact.

Aya fidgeted, her hands gripping the counter. "I'm really sorry about last night. I didn't mean to leave you like that."

Sayuri struggled to find the right words. The hurt ran deep, but she didn't want to lash out. "You had fun, right?" she said, forcing a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "That's what matters."

Aya winced, clearly sensing the underlying tension. "No! I should have been with you! What I did was wrong. I am soooo sorry Sayuri-chan!" she pleaded as she ran a hand through her unwashed hair, looking genuinely remorseful. Sayuri bit her lip, fighting back the wave of emotions.

"It's just... we promised to stick together. I felt really alone." Her voice cracked slightly, revealing more than she intended.

"I know," Aya said, her expression softening. "I should've been there for you. I'm really sorry. Can I make it up to you? Maybe we can hang out after your shift?"

Sayuri hesitated, the hurt still fresh. "I don't know, Aya. I just... I don't want to feel like that again. I think I need a few days to process this."

"I get it," Aya replied, her voice sincere. "I really do. I messed up. But please, let me make it right. I miss you."

Sayuri looked at her friend, the sincerity in Aya's eyes pulling at her heart. After a moment, she sighed, letting go of some of her frustration.

"Give me a day or two, OK? I don't want to lose you as a friend. My *only* friend. I felt betrayed last night. It makes me wonder if I can trust you again, she said truthfully, looking deeply into Aya's eyes, searching for any sign of deceit in her reply.

"I promise," Aya said, her relief evident. "I'll make it up to you, I swear."

As they stood there, the tension began to ease, and Sayuri felt a flicker of hope. Aya seemed earnest. Maybe they could patch things up.

"Alright, but you look awful," she teased lightly, a small smile breaking through. Aya laughed softly, a hint of her usual cheerfulness returning.

"Yeah, I definitely feel it. Maybe I should lay off the drinks next time," Aya said remorsefully.

"Maybe just a little," Sayuri replied, feeling a warmth in her chest. They both knew they had a lot to work through, but for now, they could start to mend their friendship.

"A few days apart might do you some good, Aya. I think you need to recharge your batteries. And...your eyes are bleeding, by the way," she smiled.

"Oh! I see! So, you think that just because I messed up that you get a free pass to insult me whenever you want to," she teased Sayuri, a relieved smile on her face, knowing that they were both committed to fixing their relationship.

"Yes, of course! I reckon that I have at least 3 months of free insults in the bank," Sayuri shot back. "Look Aya, I'm glad that you came here to apologize, but I am really busy. I'll come to your place on Tuesday night after my shift, OK? We can talk then."

"Ok. No problem. Don't work too hard! See you Tuesday!"

“Jaa ne! See you!”

Sayuri stepped through the door of her parent’s house tired from a long day shift at KFC. The smell of fried chicken still lingered on her clothes, but it was the tension in the air that struck her as she entered. She could hear her parents’ voices raised in argument, and her heart sank.

“...how could you borrow that much without telling me?” her mother’s voice was sharp, laced with disbelief.

“I thought I could manage it!” her father, Takeshi, replied, his tone desperate. “I didn’t want to worry you, Yoko. I thought it was just a temporary setback.” Sayuri’s breath caught in her throat as she quietly slipped off her shoes and stood in the entrance hall, hidden from view. She strained to catch their words, her heart sinking at the sound of her parents fighting.

“Temporary setback? You’re facing Yakuza debt collectors! Do you understand what that means?” Yoko’s voice trembled, a mix of anger and fear. “They confronted you at the bank? What were you thinking?”

“I had no choice!” Takeshi’s voice cracked. “I thought I could pay it back before it got out of hand. I didn’t want to involve you,” his tone filled with what seemed like genuine regret.

“Not involve me? You’ve already involved our entire family!” Yoko retorted, the hurt evident in her voice. “How much did you borrow, Takeshi? Where did the money go?”

There was a long pause, and Sayuri felt a knot tighten in her stomach. She could sense the shame radiating from her father. “I... it was for the family,” he finally blurted out, his voice unsteady. “I haven’t had a promotion in 10 years, and now we have three girls at school...”

“Takeshi...” Yoko started. Sayuri knew she only called her father by his first name when she was really angry. “We are supposed to be partners in everything. Were you so embarrassed that you could not discuss finances with me? Or are you hiding something?”

“What are you trying to say? Are you accusing me of something?!”

“I noticed a cash slip for jewellery when I was doing the household budget recently.” Yoko’s voice was low, but Sayuri could hear the underlying fury. “The strange thing is, I never received any jewellery from you.”

As she spoke, Sayuri stood in the hallway just outside the dining room, feeling like a spectator in a tense drama, the kind she’d seen in movies where a suspect was being interrogated by police. The way her mother leaned in, probing for answers, reminded her of a detective digging for the truth. Takeshi’s demeanour, hunched and defensive, mirrored that of a man caught in a web of lies.

“I can explain...” he started, but Yoko cut him off, “Takeshi, I love you and care for you, you know that. What power has love, but forgiveness?”

He seemed taken aback, his eyes widening in surprise. “You... love me? After everything?”

“Yes,” she replied, her voice firm. “I love you, even with your mistakes. I always have. But I can’t keep pretending that it doesn’t hurt.”

Takeshi’s expression shifted from shock to guilt. He ran a hand through his hair, visibly struggling with his emotions. “I never wanted to hurt you, Yoko. It just happened. I didn’t think—”

“Thinking isn’t enough, Takeshi,” she said, her voice softening. “I need honesty, even when it’s difficult. I deserve that.”

He looked down, shame washing over his features. “I’m so sorry. I was foolish.”

Yoko stepped closer, her heart aching for the man she loved despite everything. “I can’t change how I feel. But we need to find a way to move forward—together.”

Takeshi met her gaze, his eyes filled with regret. “I’ll do better, I promise. I don’t want to lose you.”

“You will, if you don’t lose the woman you bought jewellery for. Am I making myself clear enough?”

“Hai!” he replied, head bowed, unable to look his wife in her eyes.

As the weight of their unspoken truths hung between them, Yoko felt a flicker of hope. It wouldn’t be easy, but perhaps their love could still guide them through the darkness.

Sayuri felt tears prick at her eyes as she listened, feeling an overwhelming sense of helplessness. She had always admired her father’s strength, but now she could hear the fear in his voice, the weight of his shame.

“Now tell me what the debt collectors said,” Yoko said softly, placing a hand on her husband’s forearm.

“They gave me an ultimatum,” he continued, his tone hollow. “Pay up or face... consequences.”

Takeshi finally looked up, meeting Yoko’s gaze. “I didn’t want to burden you. I wanted to protect you—from all of this.” His voice was low, almost pleading, but it only fuelled Yoko’s simmering anger.

“Protect me? You’ve done the opposite!” Yoko shot back, her voice filled with a mix of anger and desperation. “You’ve put us all at risk. What do you think will happen if you can’t pay them back?”

Sayuri’s heart raced. *Consequences? What could that mean?* She felt as if the ground beneath her was crumbling, the world she knew tipping into chaos. She had always thought of her family as somewhat normal, but now it felt like they were trapped in a nightmare.

Yoko’s voice softened, but Sayuri could still hear the strain. “Takeshi, you should have consulted me. We could have figured this out together. You know my family has money, and I could have asked for help...”

“No!” Takeshi interrupted, a hint of panic in his voice. “You promised me, Yoko. You promised you’d never go back to them. I can’t put you in that position!”

Sayuri’s heart raced as she realized the depth of the situation. Her mother had come from wealth, but she had chosen a simpler life, marrying for love. Sayuri had always respected her mother’s choice, but now it felt like that decision was ripping them apart. After a few moments of silence filled only by the muffled sounds of their argument, Sayuri felt a wave of nausea hit her. She couldn’t bear to hear any more. She quietly turned and tiptoed down the hallway to her room, her heart heavy with the weight of new knowledge.

Once in her room, she closed the door softly and sat on her bed, staring blankly at the wall. The reality of her family’s situation settled heavily on her shoulders. She felt an overwhelming urge to help, to do something—anything. With graduation at the end of March, she knew that she could probably find a job, maybe even KFC, and she resolved to drop out of school after that.

“I’ll help pay off the loan,” she whispered to herself, determination flickering in her heart. But deep down, she knew it might not be enough to protect her father from the Yakuza.

Meanwhile, Yoko stood in the living room, her heart racing as she processed the conversation. She felt torn between her love for Takeshi and the long-buried memories of her own family’s wealth. She had promised herself never to return to that life, but now her husband was in danger. She loved her husband. She had never really been able to pinpoint what it was that attracted her to him, but that was the nature of love – it came in all shapes and sizes and was inherently inexplicable.

It was not the first time she had suspected him of having an affair, but she was determined not break up the family just because she was feeling deceived and betrayed. It was selfish of her to destroy the family unit just because her husband was unfaithful. She knew he was a good man. Yes, he drank too much and was miserable at work, but he always tried to be a good husband and father, despite failing on both accounts. Yoko knew that stress was mostly to blame.

Takeshi had never been able to handle stress. Yoko had always been the one to deal with the situations Takeshi found too stressful to handle. She had married a weak man. Yet, she still loved him. *And that, Yoko thought, is what true love is all about – loving someone in spite of their faults.*

Taking a deep breath, she made a decision. She would reach out to her mother; despite all the shame it brought her. She had to protect her family. Yoko’s fingers were trembling as she picked up the phone and dialled her mother’s number, the weight of her decision pressing heavily on her heart. The past was creeping back into her life, and she felt the familiar tension of family ties pulling her in.

As the night wore on, Sayuri lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, her heart heavy with worry. The last week had been draining – both emotionally and physically – and all she wanted to do was sleep. But sleep evaded her. She wished she could confide in Aya, but she

didn't want to burden her friend with this darkness. Instead, she resolved to keep her head down, work harder, and do everything in her power to support her family.

It was already dark as Sayuri made her way to Aya's home, her heart lightening with each step. After a long day at KFC, she was overjoyed to be able to unwind with her friend, yet still a bit apprehensive about whether they could properly heal their friendship. As she approached the familiar front door, she took a moment to smooth her hair and adjust her bag, wanting to look presentable. Aya's mother, Akiko, opened the door with a warm smile.

"Sayuri! It's so good to see you!" she exclaimed, stepping aside to let her in. The scent of something sweet wafted through the hallway, making Sayuri's stomach rumble.

"Thank you, Mrs. Tanaka," Sayuri said, bowing slightly as she entered. "It smells wonderful in here."

"Thank you," she replied, leading Sayuri into the cozy living room. "I just baked some *dorayaki*. Would you like some?"

"Oh, yes, please!" Sayuri's eyes lit up at the offer. The fluffy pancakes filled with sweet red bean paste were one of her favourites. Akiko placed one on a plate and handed it to Sayuri, watching her as she took a bite of the *dorayaki*, savouring the warm sweetness.

"This is amazing, as always," Mrs. Tanaka.

Akiko watched her with a satisfied smile.

"I'm glad you like it. And how about some tea to go with that?"

Without waiting for a response, she stood and moved to the kitchen. Sayuri knew better than to refuse. "That would be lovely!" she called after her, feeling the warmth of hospitality wash over her.

Just then, Aya entered the room. "Konichiwa. I thought I heard you," she said in a neutral tone, despite the mix of emotions swirling within her. Sayuri's presence had always brought comfort, but now it felt like a storm cloud looming overhead. Aya's heart sank as memories of the betrayal flooded back — how she had broken her promise to her best friend.

Their eyes met, and the world around them seemed to fade away. Aya's expression was a blend of anxiety and hope, but Sayuri couldn't shake the anger and disappointment that simmered just beneath the surface.

"Hey, Aya," Sayuri said tentatively, her voice barely above a whisper.

Aya crossed her arms, her gaze hardening. "Hey." The single word felt heavy, laden with the weight of their fractured friendship.

As they stood facing each other like two cowgirls in a duel, Akiko returned with a teapot and delicate cups, pouring the steaming green tea with grace. "Here you go, ladies," she said, setting the cups before them. "Enjoy."

“Thank you!” Sayuri replied, forcing a smile. She took a sip; the earthy flavour was soothing.

Sayuri was not sure if Aya’s mom was deliberately trying to lighten the mood or if she was just being polite, but she invited Sayuri to sit and was soon asking all the questions one would expect from a friend’s mother, “So, Sayuri, how are you enjoying working at KFC? What are your shifts like? What do you eat for lunch?” and so on.

After a while, Akiko excused herself to tidy up in the kitchen, leaving the girls to their conversation. “You know,” Aya said, her tone suddenly serious, “I’ve been thinking a lot about what happened at CAVE.”

Sayuri’s heart sank momentarily, memories of their night at CAVE flashing through her mind. “Yeah, me too,” she said softly. “I want us to be okay, but we need to work on the trust issue. I just can’t have a best friend who I can’t trust.”

“Let’s go to my room to talk,” Aya said softly, not wanting to air their dirty laundry in front of Akiko, who was only a few metres away, washing dishes. Sayuri nodded, her expression earnest, and followed Aya to her bedroom.

They sat on Aya’s bed, which was a traditional futon laid out on a tatami mat floor. The cover of her *shikibuton* was decorated with colourful patterns and images of her favourite anime characters, a soft, flat *makura* pillow placed at one end, providing comfort during her sleep.

Posters of popular bands were plastered across her bedroom walls - iconic J-Pop group *SMAP*, the rock band *X Japan* and few smaller posters depicting trendy idol singers, flashing bright smiles and sporting fashionable outfits. The posters created a vibrant collage that expressed Aya’s love for music and the pop culture.

Aya shifted nervously, looking down at her fingers as she fidgeted with the bracelet she had received as a present from Sayuri. “Can we talk?”

“Yes, of course. We *need* to talk,” Sayuri responded.

“I know! I’m so sorry,” Aya pleaded, her voice trembling. “I never wanted to hurt you. I did a stupid thing – choosing fun over friendship. I’m not going to blame the alcohol. I made the choice to drink too much - nobody forced me. All I can say is I’m sorry Sayuri. Can you find it in yourself to forgive me?”

Sayuri’s anger flared, but beneath it, she felt a pang of empathy. She remembered all the times they had laughed together, shared secrets, and supported each other.

“You disappointed me, Aya. But, as you say, it is in the past. I can’t really comment on the drinking because I have never been drunk. I don’t know how it makes a person feel. But I *do* know what it does to my father.”

“What do you mean by that?” asked Aya.

“It makes him argue with my mother. I hate it when that happens.”

“Yes, I am beginning to realize that alcohol is to be taken in moderation,” grimaced Aya, looking ashamed.

The silence that followed hung heavy between them. Sayuri could see the regret etched on Aya's face, but it felt like too little, too late. A part of her wanted to reach out, to mend the rift, but another part screamed to protect herself from further pain.

"I don't know if I can trust you again," Sayuri finally said, her voice barely above a whisper, the words tasting bitter on her tongue. Aya's face fell, and she nodded, tears spilling down her cheeks. "I understand. Just... give me a chance to make it right. I'll do anything."

Sayuri felt a rush of conflicting emotions. She wanted to comfort her friend, to tell her that everything would be okay, but the wound was still too raw. Instead, she said, "Atsuko once told me that forgiveness was good for mental health, when her last boyfriend cheated on her. It breaks the cycle of negativity. So, Aya – I'm giving you another chance. I like having you as a friend and, I guess, all relationships have their ups and downs."

The words hung in the air, and Aya felt a rush of emotions flood over her—surprise, relief, and an overwhelming sense of hope. "Forgive me?" she echoed, disbelief colouring her tone. "After everything?"

"Hai!" Sayuri replied, her voice steadier now. "Yes, you hurt me, and it's going to take time to rebuild what we had. But I believe we can get through this together."

Aya's heart swelled as she felt the warmth of Sayuri's sincerity washing over her, and for the first time since the betrayal, a glimmer of hope flickered within her.

"I don't want to lose you as a friend either," Aya confessed, her voice earnest. "You mean too much to me."

Tears pricked at the corners of Aya's eyes as she took in Sayuri's words. The memory of their laughter, the shared dreams, and the bond they had forged came rushing back, igniting a fierce longing to reclaim what they had lost. "I miss you, Sayuri," she admitted, her voice breaking. "I really do."

Sayuri stepped closer, vulnerability etched on her face. "Then let's start over."

"I promise to do better. I'll work hard to earn your trust back," Aya said, grateful for a second chance.

In that moment, Sayuri felt a shift within herself—a decision to embrace Aya's remorse and determination to do better. She took a deep breath, steeling herself against the risk of being hurt again, but determined to hold out hope for healing.

"Okay," she said softly, a small smile breaking through. "Let's try."

As they sat there on the futon, the tension that had once separated them began to dissolve. Sayuri felt the warmth of their friendship slowly returning, the path to healing illuminated by the sincerity of Aya's words. In that moment, she realized that despite the pain, their bond was worth fighting for.

CHAPTER 13

The school assembly hall buzzed with the chatter of students settling into their seats. Sayuri sat next to Aya, her heart heavy with the weight of the rumours swirling around them. The cold January air seemed to magnify her anxiety. She had hoped the winter break would bring some peace, but Tomoko's cruel whispers had broken that illusion the moment they returned.

As the headmistress approached the podium, Sayuri's thoughts drifted back to the humiliating incident a few weeks earlier. Throwing a basketball into Tomoko's face had felt satisfying at the time, but the apology had only given Tomoko more ammunition. Sayuri had expected a truce, but it seemed Tomoko thrived on the chaos she created.

"Good morning, students," the headmistress's voice cut through the noise, commanding attention. Sayuri forced herself to focus, but her mind kept wandering back to the rumours that painted her and Aya in a harsh, unkind light.

Tomoko had been spreading rumours that Aya and Sayuri had a *ménage à trois* with Ken Watanabe. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Aya shifting slightly, a smirk tugging at the corners of her mouth. Sayuri turned to her, curiosity piqued. "What's so funny?" she whispered, trying to keep her voice low.

Aya leaned closer, her expression mischievous. "Just wait and see," she replied, a glint of excitement in her eyes. Sayuri felt a flicker of unease mixed with intrigue. Aya had always been the more daring of the two, but what was she planning? After dispensing with the usual announcements, the headmistress cleared her throat, and the room fell silent. "And lastly, Tomoko Mitsui, please report to my office immediately after assembly."

A ripple of murmurs spread through the hall. Sayuri glanced at Aya, who was now fighting to suppress a full-blown grin. "What did you do?" Sayuri asked, her brow furrowing.

"Let's just say Tomoko might have a little surprise waiting for her," Aya replied cryptically, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

Sayuri's stomach twisted with a mix of anxiety and anticipation. Aya had always been a creative force, but she could be impulsive, especially when provoked.

"You didn't do something crazy, did you?"

"Maybe a little crazy," Aya said, her smirk widening. "But it's all in good fun. I slipped a little something into Tomoko's assignment which was due yesterday."

As the assembly continued, Sayuri couldn't shake the feeling of impending chaos. She stole another glance at Aya, who remained composed, a knowing look in her eyes. It was both comforting and alarming; the trust she had for Aya was now on shaky ground, but she also knew the lengths her friend would go to protect her. At least, when she was sober.

The headmistress concluded the assembly, and the students began to file out. Sayuri's felt her anxiety levels rise as they made their way to their lockers.

“What exactly did you put in Tomoko’s assignment?” she asked, unable to contain her curiosity any longer.

“Just a little drawing I made of Mr. Takahashi in his birth suit,” Aya said, her tone light, but Sayuri could sense the seriousness behind it. “Nothing too scandalous. Just something to make her rethink her choices.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Sayuri felt a wave of concern wash over her. “What if it backfires?”

Aya shrugged, her confidence unwavering. “Sometimes you have to fight back in your own way. Besides, I can’t stand seeing you get bullied like this.” Sayuri felt a swell of gratitude mixed with apprehension. “I appreciate it, really, but...”

“Trust me,” Aya interrupted, her voice firm. “This will make her think twice before spreading any more rumours. Remember, this is not just about you. I’m standing up for myself as well as for you.”

As they walked toward the exit, Sayuri couldn’t help but feel a sense of solidarity. Although the situation was precarious, she realized that Aya’s determination to defend her was a testament to their friendship. Perhaps this was the push they needed to reclaim their narratives.

“Just promise me you’ll be careful,” Sayuri said, her voice softening.

“Always,” Aya replied, a reassuring smile on her face. “And if things go south, I’ll handle it.”

As they made their way to class, Sayuri felt a mix of fear and excitement bubbling within her. The battle against Tomoko was far from over, but with Aya by her side, she felt a flicker of hope. Together, they would confront whatever challenges lay ahead.

CHAPTER 14

The fluorescent lights of Nippon Credit Bank flickered above Takeshi Ichikawa as he sat at his desk, staring blankly at a pile of paperwork. Numbers blurred together on the pages, each mistake amplifying the weight of his stress. The economic downturn had hit the bank hard, and as a *kacho* (section chief), the pressure to perform had only intensified. Just then, his boss, the *bucho*, emerged from his office, his face a storm cloud of frustration.

“Ichikawa! In my office, now!” he barked.

Takeshi swallowed hard, his stomach knotting in anxiety. He stood slowly, feeling the weight of dread settle on his shoulders. The walk to the *bucho*’s office felt like a march to his execution. Inside the office, the *bucho* slammed the door behind him.

“What is going on with you?” he demanded, leaning over the desk, his voice rising. “You’re making careless errors, and it’s affecting the whole team! I expect better from you!”

“I’m doing my best,” Takeshi replied, his voice barely above a whisper. He felt small under the intense scrutiny. “There’s a lot of pressure with the current situation—”

“Excuses!” the *bucho* snapped. “I don’t want to hear excuses. You need to shape up, or you won’t have a job much longer!”

Takeshi nodded, feeling the heat of humiliation wash over him. As he left the office, he could feel the eyes of his colleagues on him, their whispers trailing behind him like shadows. The stress was suffocating, a vicious cycle that left him feeling trapped.

Once the clock struck six, Takeshi decided to stay late, hoping to bury himself in work to escape his thoughts. But as the minutes ticked by, his mind drifted to the impending meeting with the Yakuza. His wife, Yoko, had reluctantly asked for help from her parents to pay off the debt, although she had tactfully omitted the Yakuza’s involvement. He knew he needed to deliver the money tonight. The weight of it all was crushing.

When he finally clocked out, the night air felt sharp against his skin. Instead of going straight to the debt collector’s ‘office’ in a dive called *Club Tsubaki*, he found himself wandering toward a pachinko parlour in Shibuya, feeling the desperate need for distraction. As he stepped inside, the bright lights and the cacophony of sounds enveloped him, momentarily washing away his worries. He got a Sapporo from a vending machine, the cold beer a balm for his frayed nerves, as he searched for an empty machine to sit at.

As he played the machines, he felt a fleeting sense of relief. The thrill of the game momentarily drowned out the anxiety gnawing at him. *This is the only place I can have peace*, he thought as he felt the tension draining from him. But as the minutes turned into hours, his decisions blurred. He lost track of time—and money.

Takeshi stumbled out of the dimly lit pachinko parlour in Shibuya, the neon lights casting a kaleidoscope of colours across his face. The sounds of clinking pachinko machines and drunken laughter echoed behind him, but all he could focus on was the weight of

his debt pressing down on him. His head spun slightly from the drinks he had consumed, but he knew he needed to face his obligations.

With a shaky hand, he raised his arm, hailing a taxi from the curb. The familiar yellow and green vehicle pulled up, its lighted sign indicating it was available. The driver eyed him with a mix of curiosity and caution as Takeshi climbed into the back seat, the door slamming shut with a dull thud.

“Club Tsubaki,” he slurred, trying to project confidence despite his inebriated state. The driver nodded, and they pulled away from the bustling street, weaving through the vibrant chaos of Shibuya. The city lights blurred into streaks as Takeshi leaned back, taking a deep breath to steady himself.

The ride felt both long and short, the pulsating energy of the city outside contrasting sharply with his inner turmoil. He thought about the Yakuza waiting for him at Club Tsubaki, the weight of his debt shadowing him like a dark cloud. As they arrived, the taxi stopped in front of the club, its façade glowing warmly under the flashing neon lights.

Takeshi fumbled with his wallet, sliding out some cash and paying the driver before stepping out onto the sidewalk. He took a moment to gather himself, smoothing down his jacket and mentally preparing for the encounter ahead. The entrance to Club Tsubaki beckoned him, a gateway to the world he needed to confront.

With a deep breath, he pushed open the door, the soft music and chatter washing over him. The atmosphere was thick with the scent of expensive perfume and the laughter of hostesses. Takeshi squared his shoulders, stepping inside to face the Yakuza and begin the process of settling his debt, knowing this was a crucial step in regaining control of his life.

Takeshi felt drained as he sat in the back of the taxi on his way home. The alcohol had dulled his senses, and he felt as if he were in a cocoon of calmness; a place where stress and tension were strictly forbidden.

“Koko ni tsukimashita,” announced the driver.

A wave of panic crashed through his cocoon as he realized he’d have to find a way to explain his actions to Yoko. As he entered the house, the door creaked loudly, and he tripped slightly on the threshold, causing a ruckus.

“I’m home!” he announced, his voice slurred and overly cheerful. He glanced around, noting the quietness of the house. The girls were asleep, blissfully unaware of the turmoil swirling in their parents’ lives.

Yoko was anxiously waiting for him in the dimly lit living room. She had spent the evening pacing, the weight of the situation pressing heavily on her. When she saw Takeshi enter, a wave of relief washed over her, but it was quickly overshadowed by concern as she took in his state.

“Takeshi!” she exclaimed, rising from her seat. “You’re drunk!”

“Just had a few drinks, Yoko. No big deal!” he laughed, but the sound was hollow, and she could see the shadows of worry etched on his face.

“Did you pay the money?” she asked, her voice steady but laced with urgency.

He paused, the laughter fading from his eyes. “I did... some of it...but it’s complicated. I might need a little more time,” he mumbled, avoiding her gaze.

Yoko’s heart sank. “What do you mean, “some of it?” She stepped closer, desperation creeping into her voice. “Takeshi, they’re not going to wait forever!”

He slumped onto the couch, the weight of his actions crashing down on him. “Relax. I gave them some money,” he said, rubbing his temples as if trying to massage away the reality of the situation.

Takeshi’s admission hit Yoko hard. The man she loved was drowning in stress and shame, and she felt helpless. “Did you gamble with the money?” she pressed, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Just a bit,” he replied, his tone defensive.

Yoko felt a wave of anger and disappointment surge within her. “You don’t understand what this means for us, for the girls! We’re in so deep, and this—this is not the way to fix it!”

“I know!” he shouted suddenly, the frustration spilling over. “But I can’t face it! I’m trying to hold everything together, and it’s just... too much!”

Yoko took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. She had always believed in their simple life, a life free from the burdens of her past. But now, it felt like that dream was slipping away. “We need to face this together, Takeshi. I can’t do it alone.”

He looked at her, the weight of his shame evident in his eyes. “I’m sorry, Yoko. I thought I could handle it.” Tears brimmed in Yoko’s eyes as she fought to maintain her composure. “You need to take responsibility for your actions. We can’t keep living in fear. How much did you pay them? Please tell me it was most of it.”

“Well....it was more than half. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it,” he slurred, battling to keep his eyelids open.

Yoko was about to tell him that she had lost face by going to her mother to ask for money, but realised that her failing husband was probably not going to remember anything in the morning anyway, so she just sighed and started helping him to bed.

The muffled sounds of Yoko’s efforts seeped through the thin walls of the house, pulling Sayuri from her sleep. She blinked in the dim light, the remnants of dreams fading as she registered the noise—a soft, strained grunt, followed by the dull thud of her father’s body against the doorframe.

Groggy and disoriented, Sayuri lay still for a moment, listening intently. Her mother’s voice, low and strained, mingled with the heavy silence of the night. It was a familiar sound, one that had become all too common in their household. Takeshi was home, but not in the way he should be.

As the noise continued—her mother’s muffled calls, the shuffle of feet—Sayuri felt a pang of urgency in her chest. She slipped from her bed, the cool floor sending a shiver up her spine. Quietly, she opened her bedroom door, peering into the dimly lit hallway.

Yoko was struggling to lift her husband, his dead weight nearly overwhelming her. Sayuri's heart ached as she watched the scene unfold. She could see the strain in her mother's face, the lines of worry and despair etched deeply into her features. It was a look that spoke volumes, a silent testament to the burdens Yoko carried alone.

Without a second thought, Sayuri stepped out of her room, her bare feet silent against the floor. She approached her mother, who was momentarily caught off guard by her presence. There were no words exchanged; the heaviness in the air rendered them unnecessary. Instead, Sayuri's resolve shone through in her actions.

"Mom, let me help," she said softly, gently slipping under her father's arm. Together, they lifted him, each of them straining against the weight, but moving in sync as they maneuvered him toward the bedroom. As they worked together, Sayuri caught a glimpse of her mother's eyes—dark circles framed by fatigue, a flicker of gratitude mixed with lingering sadness. Yoko's breath came in quick bursts, and Sayuri could sense the emotional toll this took on her.

Once they managed to guide Takeshi onto the bed, Sayuri stepped back, observing as Yoko adjusted the covers, her movements tender despite the exhaustion. The room was quiet again, the only sound the soft rustle of fabric and heavy, uneven breathing.

Sayuri felt a swell of determination rise within her. She wanted to help her parents, to take away their pain and burden, but uncertainty gnawed at her. What could she do? She was just a girl, still navigating her own life, caught between the innocence of youth and the harsh realities of adulthood. As her mother turned to leave the room, Sayuri reached out, gently touching Yoko's arm. "Mom, are you okay?" The question hung in the air, a fragile thread of concern.

Yoko met her gaze, a mixture of pride and sorrow reflected in her eyes. "I'm fine, Sayuri. Just tired," she replied, her voice steadier than it felt. But Sayuri could see through the facade. "I want to help," she whispered, the words filled with earnestness. "I'll do whatever I can."

Yoko's expression softened, and she pulled Sayuri into a brief, tight embrace. "You're already helping, my sweet girl. Just being here means everything."

As they stood together in the dim light, Sayuri felt a flicker of hope. She resolved then and there to find a way to uplift her family, to ease the burdens they all carried. If only she could figure out how to make a difference. Even if she didn't have the answers yet, she would not let her parents face their struggles alone.

CHAPTER 15

The classroom buzzed with the chatter of students during lunch break, the air filled with the smell of packed bento boxes. Sayuri sat at her desk, carefully unwrapping her lunch. She had a colourful bento filled with a variety of foods: fluffy white rice shaped into a small heart, vibrant pickled vegetables, and a few pieces of teriyaki chicken glistening with sauce. Beside her, Aya opened her own bento, revealing an assortment of sushi rolls, a small salad, and a slice of *tamagoyaki*, the sweet Japanese omelette.

“Wow, your lunch looks amazing,” Sayuri said, eyeing Aya's food with a hint of envy.

“Thanks! My mom went all out today,” Aya replied with a grin, taking a bite of her sushi. The flavours burst in her mouth, and she savoured the moment, appreciating the comforting familiarity of her lunch. As they ate, Sayuri's mind raced with her plan. She had been tossing the idea around for days, but she needed Aya's help to make it a reality. The burden of her family's situation pressed heavily on her shoulders, and she felt an urgency to act.

“Aya,” she began, her voice steady but laced with apprehension. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, what's up?” Aya replied, looking up from her bento, her expression curious.

Sayuri took a deep breath, choosing her words carefully. “I've never really asked you about what happened between you and that guy at CAVE. I don't want to pry. If you wanted to tell me, you would have. But... do you still have any contact with him?”

Aya's expression shifted slightly, a mix of surprise and contemplation. “You mean Ken Watanabe?” She paused, recalling the night. “Honestly, I was too drunk to remember much. It was a blur. But I didn't sleep with him, if that's what you're worried about.”

Relief washed over Sayuri, but she pressed on. “So, you do remember him?”

“Yeah, I remember his name. He's apparently a Yakuza member,” Aya replied, her tone slightly lighter but still cautious. “He invited me to his penthouse at the Shibuya Granbell Hotel. Of course, I didn't go.”

Sayuri's heart raced at the mention of the hotel. The Granbell was known for its opulence, a place where the rich and powerful gathered. “Did you part on good terms?” she asked, trying to keep her voice neutral.

“Yeah, I think so,” Aya said, shrugging slightly. “It was all very casual. He seemed nice enough, but I didn't want to get involved with that kind of crowd.”

Taking a deep breath, Sayuri decided to lay the groundwork for her request. “I need a favour, Aya. I want you to come with me to the Granbell Hotel.”

Aya raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. “Why do you want to go there? It sounds... intense.”

Sayuri hesitated, grappling with her desire to be honest and the fear of revealing too much. “I need a proper introduction to Ken Watanabe. I want to see if he has any influence over the debt my father owes.”

Aya’s eyes widened in concern. “You want to plead with a Yakuza member? Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“I know it sounds risky, but I have to do something. My family is in a bad situation, and I feel like this is my only option,” Sayuri said, her voice steady despite the turmoil inside her. She skirted the truth about leaving school, focusing instead on the desperation of her family’s financial crisis. Aya studied her friend’s face, sensing the urgency behind her words.

“Okay, but what if he’s not willing to help?”

“I’ll figure something out,” Sayuri replied, her determination shining through. “I just need to try.”

After a moment of silence, Aya sighed, her resolve softening. Despite having tried to even the score by getting Tomoko into trouble, Aya still felt their ‘friendship account’ was still not balanced. Betrayal was a worth more than one silly prank.

“Alright, I’ll introduce you. But we have to be careful. I don’t want you getting caught up in something dangerous.”

“Thank you, Aya,” Sayuri said, her heart swelling with gratitude. “It means a lot to me.”

The bell rang, signalling the end of lunch break, and the classroom began to fill with noise as students prepared for the next class. Sayuri felt a sense of purpose igniting within her. She had a plan, and with Aya’s help, she would at least have a chance to confront the shadows looming over her family. As they packed their bento boxes, Aya glanced at Sayuri, a mix of concern and camaraderie in her eyes.

“Just promise me you’ll be careful. This isn’t just some game.”

“I promise,” Sayuri said, her voice firm. “I won’t do anything reckless.”

With their resolve set, the two friends walked to their next class, the gravity of their decisions hanging in the air, but a flicker of hope ignited in Sayuri’s heart. She was ready to take charge of her life, no matter the challenges that lay ahead.

Sayuri stepped nervously into the opulent lobby of the Granbell Hotel. The air was thick with the scent of polished wood and expensive perfume.

“This way,” Aya said, spotting the marble reception desk, deftly guiding Sayuri by her elbow. Sayuri and Aya walked side by side, their anxious anticipation palpable as they approached the elegantly dressed lady seated behind the desk.

Sayuri wore a soft white blouse adorned with delicate lace trim, tucked neatly into her high-waisted plaid skirt that swayed gently with each step. The tailored navy blazer she wore added a touch of sophistication, making her look both polished and youthful. Her

black loafers clicked softly against the marble floor, and she clutched a small handbag, her fingers fidgeting with the strap.

Aya exuded a more vibrant flair. She sported a loose-fitting, bright red turtleneck that contrasted beautifully with her dark, high-waisted trousers. The cropped leather jacket she wore gave her a bit of an edge, lending a bold aura to her otherwise casual ensemble. Her ankle boots, with their chunky heels, added a confident stride to her steps, and a crossbody bag swung lightly at her hip.

As they reached the reception desk, the atmosphere shifted. The lobby was bustling with guests, but the polished marble and elegant decor made it feel serene. Sayuri's brain froze as they approached the receptionist, unable to choose between fight or flight, just paralysed with fear. *You can do this! Gaman!* she told herself, mentally steeling herself for what lay ahead.

"What if he doesn't remember us?" Sayuri started to panic. Aya leaned in slightly, her demeanour bold and assertive, "I've got this. Just stand a bit behind me and smile sweetly."

As Sayuri and Aya stood at the reception desk, the soft hum of the hotel lobby swirling around them. The elegant receptionist, a poised woman with a sleek bun and a tailored uniform, looked up with a warm smile.

"Good afternoon, ladies. Welcome to the Shibuya Granbell Hotel. How may I help you?" Her voice was smooth, exuding professionalism.

Aya stepped forward, her confidence shining through. "Good afternoon! I'm a friend of Ken Watanabe," she said, her tone casual. "I just happened to be in the area and wanted to say hello. Is he available?"

The receptionist's smile remained, but her eyes flickered with a hint of curiosity. "I see. May I ask your name?"

"Aya," she replied quickly, glancing back at Sayuri for reassurance. "And this is my friend, Sayuri."

"Thank you, Aya. I will quickly check to see if he is here. Please hold on for a moment." The receptionist picked up the phone, her fingers poised over the buttons. Sayuri felt her heart race, anxiety creeping in as she stood beside Aya. She whispered, "Are you sure about this?"

Aya shot her a confident grin. "Trust me, we'll be fine. Just act natural."

The receptionist spoke into the phone, her voice low and professional. "Hello, Mr. Watanabe? There are two young ladies here. One claims to be a friend and wishes to say hello." The girls watched anxiously as she spoke into the phone, "I'll ask them, sir."

"Mr. Watanabe wants to know your names please," the receptionist asked, cupping one hand over the receiver.

"Tanaka, Aya and Ichikawa, Sayuri desu!" Aya blurted out almost immediately.

She repeated their names, and after a moment, she nodded, jotting down their names as she spoke. "Very well, sir. I'll let them know you'll be down shortly."

She hung up and turned back to them. "Mr. Watanabe will be down shortly. Please have a seat in the lounge area while you wait."

"Thank you so much!" Aya said, her excitement bubbling over. Sayuri felt a mixture of relief and apprehension as they moved to the plush seating area nearby. As they settled into the cozy chairs, Aya leaned in, her voice a whisper. "See? Easy! Just be yourself when he arrives." Sayuri nodded, but her mind raced with thoughts of what to say.

"What if he doesn't remember me?" she murmured.

"He will," Aya assured her. "We've got this."

Moments later, the lobby door swung open, and Sayuri's heart fluttered as she caught sight of Ken striding in, his presence commanding yet relaxed. Aya squeezed her hand, and Sayuri took a deep breath, bracing herself for whatever came next.

"What a surprise!" he greeted with a warm smile, his eyes sparkling with interest. "I never expected to see you two lovely ladies again."

"I apologize for being so forward by coming here," Aya started, playing the role of a repentant sinner with ease. "I'm not sure if you remember my friend, Sayuri?" she said, looking at Sayuri and then Ken.

"Of course! Who can forget those big brown eyes," he said smoothly, smiling at Sayuri.

"Well, Mr. Watanabe, she has something to tell you. I think you will find what she has to say very interesting," Aya announced confidently.

"Is that so? I'm intrigued. Why don't you come up to my suite and tell me all about it," he invited.

"I'll wait for you in the lobby?" Aya suggested, torn between protecting her friend from potential harm and her desire not to cramp her friend's style. Sayuri nodded, her stomach fluttering as Aya walked away, leaving her alone with Ken.

Sayuri was in awe as she stepped out of the private elevator. Ken Watanabe's penthouse suite at the Shibuya Granbell Hotel was a breathtaking blend of modern elegance and traditional Japanese aesthetics, reflecting both sophistication and comfort. The spacious foyer was adorned with minimalist art pieces and warm wooden accents, a circular polished oak table with a vase of fresh flowers, added a splash of colour to the serene atmosphere.

They crossed through the expansive living area, which was bathed in natural light, thanks to floor-to-ceiling windows that offered stunning views of the Tokyo skyline. Plush, oversized sofas in muted tones were arranged around a low coffee table, creating an inviting space for conversation. A soft area rug anchored the seating, while tasteful artwork and decorative lanterns adorned the walls, infusing a touch of Japanese culture.

“This way,” Ken indicated with an open hand, as he led the way through a dining area where a sleek dining table made of dark wood was illuminated by a modern chandelier that hung gracefully above.

“Here we are,” he said as he reached the doorway of his office, pausing and beckoning Sayuri to enter first.

Colour me impressed, she thought, surveying the large study, equipped with a sleek desk, bookshelves filled with literature, and a comfortable chair. *What a nice place!* she thought, attracted by this quiet haven amidst the chaos of city life.

“Please, have a seat,” he gestured toward a plush armchair. Sayuri sank into the luxurious fabric, her fingers nervously twisting the hem of her skirt. Ken took a seat across from her, his demeanour shifting to one of seriousness.

“What is so important that you feel the need to come all this way to see me?”

Sayuri’s heart skipped a beat. “I am so sorry to bother you Mr. Watanabe, sir! I will leave you now!” standing up to go.

“Whoa! Please sit down!” Ken insisted, his face relaxing into a smile. “It’s OK. You have piqued my curiosity and you are already here, so whatever you came here to say – just say it.”

Sayuri felt ashamed as she related the story of her father’s debt and how she had recognised one of the debt collectors at the CAVE nightclub, all the while continuously fiddling, seldom raising her chin to look at Ken.

“What is your father’s name?” he asked, once Sayuri was done.

“Ichikawa, Takeshi San,” she replied meekly.

“OK. Just give me a minute while I make a phone call,” he ordered as he picked up his landline and dialled.

“Takuya, I need to know how much Takeshi Ichikawa still owes us. Now!” replacing the receiver forcefully. Sayuri was both impressed and intimidated by this powerful and dangerous man.

Sayuri sat comfortably in a plush chair, her hands clasped in her lap, trying to calm the flutter of nerves in her stomach. The rich aroma of polished wood mixed with a hint of fresh greenery from the potted bonsai in the corner. Sayuri watched curiously as he stood up and gracefully approached a sleek, minimalist tea set displayed on a low table. The set was a beautiful fusion of modern design and traditional craftsmanship, with delicate porcelain cups and a deep, earthy teapot. He prepared the green tea with practiced ease, the ritual almost meditative.

“Would you like some?” he asked, glancing over his shoulder with a warm smile that made Sayuri’s heart skip.

“Yes, please,” she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

Ken poured the steaming green tea into two cups, the liquid a vibrant shade of jade. As he carried the cups back to her, the steam curled upwards, filling the air with a comforting scent.

“Here you go,” he said, placing a cup in front of her, his tone gentle. “I hope you like it.”

Sayuri wrapped her fingers around the warm cup, savouring the moment. “It smells wonderful,” she said, taking a cautious sip. The tea was smooth and slightly sweet, a perfect balance that made her feel at ease.

As they waited for the return phone call, the atmosphere was filled with an unspoken tension. Ken leaned back, watching her with an intensity that made her cheeks flush.

“You know,” he began, his voice soft yet thoughtful, “I admire your determination. It’s rare to see someone so young willing to take risks for their family.”

Sayuri looked down at her tea, the compliment making her heart race. “I just want to help,” she replied, her shyness creeping back. “My family means everything to me.”

Ken nodded; his gaze unwavering. “That kind of loyalty is admirable. It will take you far in life.”

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment, the soft clinking of the cups the only sound breaking the quiet. Sayuri stole glances at Ken, her mind churning with thoughts of the challenges ahead and the mysteries that surrounded him.

Just then, the phone on Ken’s desk rang, breaking the moment. He leaned forward, picking it up with a calm confidence. “Watanabe,” he answered, his tone shifting to businesslike as he listened intently. Sayuri watched him, noting how he effortlessly transitioned from the warm, inviting host to a commanding figure in control. After a brief conversation, he hung up and looked at Sayuri, a slight smile returning.

“That is good news. It appears that your father has already paid over half his debt.”

As he spoke, Sayuri felt a surge of determination, bolstered by his presence. The world outside might be daunting, but in this moment, with the warmth of the tea and Ken’s encouraging words, she felt more confident to face whatever lay ahead.

“I tell you what. Never before have I had such a determined young schoolgirl approach me and ask me for a favour. Your bravery has impressed me, so I will make a deal with you,” he said, placing his elbows on the desk and interlocking his fingers – a bemused look on his face. Sayuri was on tenterhooks.

What is he about to say? she fretted. Her stomach felt as if an army of eels was fighting and she realised that she was holding her breath.

“If you assist me with a few small tasks—delivering messages, running errands—you can help pay off your family’s debt,” he explained, his voice smooth as silk. “It’s a way for you to take control.”

She frowned, the gravity of his words sinking in. “What kind of tasks?”

“Mostly simple things. Picking up packages, delivering important documents, maybe even some light surveillance,” he replied, his gaze steady.

“But you should know, it comes with risks,” continued Ken.

“Risks?” Sayuri echoed, her heart pounding. The implications were daunting, but the thought of alleviating her family’s burden was enticing.

Ken leaned forward slightly; his charisma undeniable. “I won’t lie to you, Sayuri. This world isn’t safe. But I see potential in you. You’re determined, and I think you’ll go far.”

Sayuri felt her cheeks heat at his compliment, her shyness battling the stirring attraction she felt toward him. Despite the age difference—he was at least twenty-five years older—she couldn’t help but admire his confidence, his power.

“I need assurance,” she finally said, her voice steadying. “If I do this, you must tell your debt collectors that my father’s debt is cleared and refuse any future payments.”

Ken’s expression softened, and he nodded slowly. “I can agree to that. You have my word.”

Relief washed over her, mingling with the thrill of the agreement. They shared green tea, the warm steam curling between them as they spoke. Ken’s compliments flowed easily, weaving a tapestry of encouragement around her.

“You’re not just a schoolgirl,” he said, a hint of admiration in his voice. “You have the spirit of a warrior. I can see it. Gaman.”

Sayuri’s heart raced as she looked down at her knees, once more feeling the heat of a blush spread across her cheeks. The chemistry between them was undeniable, yet the barriers loomed large in her mind.

Once the tea was finished, Ken stood and extended his hand. The handshake lingered, his grip firm yet gentle, sending shivers down her spine. “Come to the hotel lobby tomorrow after school, *Yamato Nadeshiko*,” Ken said, using a complimentary phrase referring to the idealized image of a traditional Japanese woman, embodying virtues such as grace, elegance, and modesty.

“H-Hai!” she stammered, her voice barely above a whisper as she pulled her hand away, feeling the weight of his gaze. As he escorted her to the elevator he said, “Takuya will meet you downstairs at reception. Just ask for him at reception when you get here. He will give you instructions. OK?”

“Hai!” she agreed, bowing her head slightly.

As she exited the penthouse elevator, the lobby buzzed with life, but her mind was clouded with thoughts of Ken and their conversation. She spotted Aya, who was waiting eagerly.

“What happened? What did he say?” Aya bombarded her with questions as they stepped outside into the bustling Tokyo streets.

Sayuri hesitated, choosing her words carefully. “He... he offered to help my family. I’m going to run some errands for him.”

Aya’s eyes widened. “Errands? Like what? Is it dangerous?”

Sayuri bit her lip, unsure how much to reveal. “It’s just delivering things. He said he’d clear my dad’s debt if I help.”

“A Yakuza is helping you? This is huge, Sayuri!” Aya exclaimed, her voice a mix of excitement and concern. “But are you sure about this? What if it gets you into trouble?”

“I know,” Sayuri replied, her determination hardening. “But I have to do something. I can’t just sit by and let my family suffer.” Aya looked at her, a mix of admiration and apprehension in her eyes.

“Just be careful, okay? You don’t know what kind of world you’re stepping into.”

“I will,” Sayuri promised, feeling the weight of her decision settle on her shoulders.

“He also called me Yamato Nadeshiko,” Sayuri said.

“Traditional daughter of Japan,” said Aya. “I think that is a compliment, Sayuri,” Aya smiled. “He seems to like you.”

Sayuri blushed. “He’s much older than me. I’m sure he is not interested in a young peasant like me,” said Sayuri dismissively.

“Well, some people say that age is just a number,” commented Aya.

“He’s handsome and everything, but I am only interested in paying off my father’s debt – nothing else,” Sayuri said with doubtful sincerity.

“Whatever you say, my friend,” said Aya teasingly.

As they walked home, the streets of Tokyo buzzed with life, but all Sayuri could think about was the path she had chosen and the enigmatic man who had ignited a fire within her.

CHAPTER 16

Sayuri adjusted her blazer, a mix of nerves and excitement coursing through her. After a day spent in school, she now found herself in the unfamiliar world of Yakuza work, a stark contrast to her sheltered life.

It felt weird wandering the bustling streets of Shibuya instead of being at home in her room. It felt both exhilarating and intimidating. She had taken a change of smart clothes to school and had quickly changed in the arcade restroom before meeting Takuya in the Granbell Hotel lobby.

Sayuri estimated that Takuya was in his early 30s. He was probably a little under 6ft tall with a lean, athletic build that suggested both strength and agility. His jet-black hair was worn in a slicked-back style, glistening slightly from pomade. His features were sharp, with a prominent jawline and high cheekbones. When she looked into his dark brown eyes, she saw a hint of intelligence mixed with danger.

A subtle scar ran along his left eyebrow, a testament to his past experiences, giving him a rugged allure, but his demeanour was calm yet assertive. At this stage, she was unaware that he was a *shatei* in the organization, but she would soon find out the complex role he and others of his rank played. Now, he was walking beside her, his presence a reminder of the gravity of her new role. He wore a sharp black suit, and his eyes scanned the surroundings with a practiced vigilance. He explained the mission to Sayuri as they walked.

“Remember, Sayuri,” he said, his voice low, “you’re delivering a letter to the bank Chairman. It’s crucial this goes smoothly.”

Sayuri nodded, her heart in her throat. “What if he asks questions?”

“Just stick to the script. You’re a messenger, nothing more.” Takuya’s tone was firm but not unkind. “I’ll be waiting here in the lobby. Deliver the letter, wait for a package, and don’t come back without it.”

“Hai!” she replied nervously.

They arrived at the sleek, modern bank building, its glass façade reflecting the vibrant energy of the city. Sayuri stepped into the cool interior, her heels clicking softly against the polished floor. The lobby was bustling with professionals, their voices a muted hum against the backdrop of soft instrumental music. Takuya gestured for her to go ahead. “I’ll be right here,” he said, his expression serious. “You can do this.”

Taking a deep breath, Sayuri squared her shoulders and walked toward the elevators. She pressed the button for the Chairman’s floor, feeling the weight of the envelope held securely in her hand. The elevator doors slid shut, and she felt a momentary wave of isolation as the city sounds faded away. When the doors opened, Sayuri stepped into a sleek corridor, the walls adorned with contemporary art. As she approached the Chairman’s office, a voice startled her, “Good afternoon, Miss. How can I help you today?”

Sayuri was startled. She turned to see where the voice was coming from. A lady in a charcoal pantsuit was sitting behind a reception desk cleverly tucked into a recess in the corridor passage. Sayuri thought that she must be close to 50 years old, although it was hard to tell with her hair in a professional updo and her understated makeup.

Quickly composing herself, she walked confidently up to the reception desk and said, "Good afternoon. I have an urgent letter for Chairman Matsumoto. I have been instructed to hand deliver it."

The secretary stared at Sayuri incredulously, as if to say. *Who on earth does this young schoolgirl think she is just waltzing in here like she owns the place*, but her expression remained professional, yet slightly wary.

The secretary looked straight into Sayuri's eyes, trying to intimidate her, and said sternly, "I'm sorry, but you'll need to leave it with me. Mr. Matsumoto is busy with appointments today."

Sayuri felt a flicker of disappointment but remembered the script Takuya had given her. "Actually, I was instructed to hand-deliver this letter. It's quite important. It's from Ken Watanabe."

At the mention of Ken Watanabe's name, the secretary's demeanour shifted. She leaned back in her chair, her interest piqued. "Ken Watanabe?" she repeated, a hint of panic in her voice. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Sayuri replied, her confidence growing. "He specifically asked that I deliver it personally."

The secretary considered this for a moment, glancing at the clock on the wall. After a brief pause, she nodded. "Very well. If it's from Mr. Watanabe, I can make an exception. Please have a seat," she offered, as she smiled nervously at Sayuri. Relief washed over Sayuri as she stepped forward, her heart pounding with a mix of excitement and anxiety.

"Thank you so much," she enthused.

The secretary sashayed back behind her desk and quickly picked up the receiver and pressed a button on the console. A few moments later she said, "Chairman Matsumoto, you have a messenger from Mr. Ken Watanabe."

"What is your name?" she asked Sayuri, looking up at her.

"Ichikawa, Sayuri, desu!"

"Please come with me," she instructed, replacing the receiver as she spoke.

"Hai!" she obeyed, and stood up to follow Mr. Matsumoto's secretary to the Chairman's office, a bit further down the polished hallway, her heels clicking softly against the floor. Sayuri's palms were sweaty and her throat was as dry as a bone.

Gaman, she reminded herself, a new sense of determination rising in her. The secretary paused at the ornate door and knocked gently.

"Enter," came the authoritative voice from within.

The secretary opened the door and stepped inside, gesturing for Sayuri to follow.

"Chairman Matsumoto, this is Sayuri," she introduced.

With a nod from Matsumoto, the secretary discreetly exited, leaving Sayuri standing before the imposing figure of the Chairman. Sayuri stood motionless in the spacious office which was filled with elegant furnishings and had large windows overlooking the city. Mr. Matsumoto sat behind a large mahogany desk; his expression serious as he looked up from a stack of papers.

"Ah, you must be the messenger," he said, his tone neutral but curious. "What do you have for me?"

Sayuri walked forward, holding out the envelope. "This is a letter from Ken Watanabe," she said, trying to maintain her composure.

Mr. Matsumoto took the envelope, his brow furrowing slightly as he examined it. "Thank you. You can leave it here."

"Sumimasen, Chairman Matsumoto, but I have been instructed to remain here until you have read the letter. Mr. Watanabe's instructions, sir."

The Chairman looked flustered and unsure. He was visibly struggling to maintain his composure, but he straightened his spine and took a deep breath before using a gold-plated letter opener to expertly open the letter. He paused for a few seconds, took another deep breath and took the letter from the envelope.

Despite his best efforts to maintain an inscrutable façade, Sayuri could see the angst in his eyes as he unfolded the letter slowly and began to silently read. A slight tremor became evident in his left hand and he somehow managed to keep his voice steady as he said, "Could you please wait at reception for your package. You should have it within 10 minutes."

"Hai!" Sayuri answered and stepped out of his office.

"The Chairman has asked me to wait for a package," she declared to the anxious secretary. "Is it OK to sit here," she asked politely, glancing at a small leather sofa tucked between two potted rubber plants.

"Of course. Can I get you something to drink while you wait? Green tea, perhaps?" she replied obsequiously, a false smile plastered on her face.

"Green tea will be great, thank you. And a glass of tap water please."

Her throat was still dry from fear, and she realised that she was breathing heavily. By the time the tea arrived, complete with a side plate of *namagashi*, Sayuri was beginning to calm down. She took the paper napkin the secretary had brought and wiped a few beads of perspiration from her forehead, then gulped down the glass of water.

Ahh! That's better, she thought, as she picked up a sweet delicately decorated as a snowflake. It was delicious. She glanced up at the secretary, who was trying not to make it too obvious that she was staring at Sayuri. Just then, the secretary's phone buzzed.

"Hai!" she answered, knowing it was the Chairman's line.

After a couple of seconds, she hurriedly entered the Chairman's office and returned holding a small jewellery box.

"Just a minute please. Let me put this in a gift bag for you," opening a stationary cupboard as she spoke. "Here you go," she said to Sayuri, as she handed the gift bag to her.

"Thank you," Sayuri replied, feeling a mix of relief and pride. As she exited the office, the secretary offered her a small smile, a silent acknowledgment of her success. Sayuri felt a rush of exhilaration; she had navigated the first hurdle successfully, and for a moment, the world of the Yakuza felt a little less daunting. As she walked back toward the elevator, she couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. Once back in the lobby, she spotted Takuya waiting, his expression unreadable.

"Did you get the package" he asked, his tone neutral.

"Hai!" she replied, feeling a mix of pride and anxiety. "Here," she said, handing him the gift bag.

"What's in it?" she whispered, seeing the seriousness in his eyes.

Takuya's expression darkened slightly. "Just a reminder of the importance of following instructions."

A chill ran down Sayuri's spine, but she pushed the feeling away.

"Can we go now?"

"Not yet. We need to check the contents first." He led her to a quieter corner of the lobby, away from prying eyes.

With a sense of dread, Sayuri watched Takuya as he removed the jewellery box from the gift bag and opened it carefully, revealing an elongated object wrapped in a blood-stained handkerchief. As he unwrapped it slowly, Sayuri's heart raced. *What is this?* she thought to herself.

Takuya's expression was unreadable as he revealed the Chairman's freshly amputated pinky fingertip.

"This is a lesson," he said, as if he could read her mind, "For those who don't follow orders."

Sayuri's eyes widened as realization hit her. "What do you mean?"

"*Yubitsume*," he replied, his voice low. "A reminder of what happens when loyalty is tested."

Panic surged within her, but she knew better than to show it. Takuya closed the box and placed it back into the gift bag, his demeanour shifting back to calm.

"Now, let's go."

As they walked out of the bank, Sayuri felt a mix of dread and determination. This world was darker than she had imagined, but she was in it now, and there was no turning back.

Arriving back at Ken's hotel, Takuya and Sayuri entered the lobby.

“That’s all for today,” Takuya said, reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out a thickish envelope and handed it to her. “Right. Take this.”

“Must I look inside,” Sayuri asked puzzled, as she looked up at Takuya’s stern face.

“Only if you like money,” he replied smirking.

“But I thought I was working to pay off a debt,” she said, panic rising in her voice.

“You are. The boss wants you to go buy some nice clothes. He doesn’t want you to look like the schoolgirl you are. Don’t worry, it is not part of your debt. Consider it a perk of the job.”

Sayuri was speechless. She quickly placed the envelope inside her bag and searched for an adequate response. But she gave up.

“I don’t know what to say,” she confessed.

Takuya gave her a wink and said, “You did well today. You can come an hour later tomorrow. “Go shopping. That’s an order,” he smiled and waved her away with his hand.

CHAPTER 17

The sound of excited chatter filled the room as the students settled into their seats. Sayuri sat quietly, her mind still buzzing from the events of the past few days. The atmosphere was familiar, yet she felt a sense of disconnection, as if she were observing her life from a distance.

Mrs. Matsumoto, their homeroom teacher, stood at the front of the class, her voice steady as she began the roll call. "Aoki," she called, and the students responded with a chorus of "Present!" The rhythm of names echoed in the background, but Sayuri found it hard to concentrate. Thoughts of her new responsibilities loomed large in her mind, the weight of her secret work for the Yakuza pressing down on her.

"Sayuri, Ichikawa," Mrs. Matsumoto said, her tone shifting slightly as she glanced up from the attendance sheet. Sayuri raised her hand and replied, "Present," her voice barely above a whisper.

As the roll continued, Sayuri noticed a flicker of something in Mrs. Matsumoto's eyes—perhaps concern or curiosity, but it quickly vanished. Once the roll call was complete, the classroom fell into a buzz of chatter, students eager to discuss their plans for the weekend.

"Class, settle down," Mrs. Matsumoto instructed, her voice firm yet gentle. The students quieted, and she began to explain the day's lesson. But Sayuri's thoughts drifted again, her mind racing with the implications of her actions and the debt that loomed over her family.

Once the lesson concluded, the bell rang, signalling the end of homeroom. As the students began to shuffle out, Mrs. Matsumoto called Sayuri to the front of the class. "Sayuri, could you come here for a moment?"

Sayuri approached the desk, her heart pounding slightly. "Yes, Mrs. Matsumoto?"

The teacher glanced around to ensure no one was listening before leaning closer. "I have something for you." She slipped a folded note into Sayuri's hand, her expression serious. "Please read this in private before the end of school today. It's important. And keep it to yourself."

Sayuri felt a thrill of intrigue mixed with apprehension. "Okay," she replied, tucking the note into her pocket, deciding to read it in private as instructed. "Is everything alright?"

Mrs. Matsumoto smiled softly, but there was a hint of tension in her eyes. "Just some advice I'd like to share. You'll understand later. Remember, don't tell anyone."

"Of course," Sayuri said, sensing the weight of the moment. She turned to leave, curiosity gnawing at her as she walked back to her seat. What could Mrs. Matsumoto possibly want to discuss in secret?

As the final bell rang, signalling the end of the school day, Sayuri gathered her things and stepped into the bustling hallway. Students filled the corridors, laughter and chatter echoing around her, but her mind was elsewhere. She made her way to the school gate, where she would wait for Aya, her thoughts consumed by the note.

Once outside, she found a quiet corner near a row of cherry blossom trees still clinging to their winter branches. The air was crisp, and she took a moment to gather her thoughts before pulling out the note. With a quick glance around to ensure no one was watching, she unfolded it.

Sayuri,

Meet me at the ramen shop on Shinjuku Street after school. I need to talk to you about something important. Please don't mention this to anyone.

—Mrs. Matsumoto

Sayuri felt her heart rate increase. What could be so important that it required secrecy? She felt a knot forming in her stomach as she folded the note back up, her mind spinning with possibilities. She resolved to go to the ramen shop and find out what Mrs. Matsumoto wanted to discuss. Just then, she spotted Aya approaching, her expression animated.

“Sayuri! Sorry I’m late! You won’t believe what happened in art class today!” Aya exclaimed, her energy infectious.

“Hey, Aya” Sayuri replied, forcing a smile as she tucked the note back into her pocket. “I can’t walk home with you today. I’ve got something important to do after school.”

“Oh? What’s going on?” Aya asked, her curiosity piqued.

“Just... a meeting with Mrs. Matsumoto,” Sayuri said, deciding to keep the details to herself for now. “I must rush. We’ll talk later, okay?”

“Sure! You can tell me all about it later. See you!”

“Yes. Jaa ne!”

As she strode purposefully in the direction of Shinjuku Street, Sayuri couldn’t shake the feeling that the meeting would change everything.

The warm, savoury aroma of broth and noodles filled the air as Sayuri pushed open the door to the ramen shop. A small bell jingled above her, announcing her arrival. She stepped inside, the cozy atmosphere wrapping around her like a warm blanket. The shop was modest, with wooden benches and colourful lanterns hanging from the ceiling, creating a welcoming ambiance.

Sayuri approached the counter and ordered a Coke, her mind filled with questions. She found a small table by the window, the soft glow of the fading sunlight struggling to illuminate the evening. As she waited, she couldn’t shake the feeling of anticipation mixed with anxiety. Why had Mrs. Matsumoto asked to meet her in secret? What could be so important that it required this private setting?

Her thoughts churned as she sipped her drink, the bubbles fizzing in her throat. She considered the implications of their conversation. Did Mrs. Matsumoto know about her involvement with the Yakuza? What if she was there to confront her about it? As the

anxious knot tightened in her stomach, she realised her fingers were tapping nervously against the table.

The bell above the door jingled again, forcing Sayuri to focus on her surroundings. She looked up curiously and saw Mrs. Matsumoto enter, her expression apologetic. "I'm so sorry I'm late, Sayuri!" she said, her voice warm but tinged with urgency. "Thank you for waiting."

"It's okay," Sayuri replied, trying to mask her unease. Mrs. Matsumoto looked around and then approached the table, her long hair cascading over her shoulders. "Would you like a bowl of ramen? I'm going to order one," she offered.

"Sure, I'll have ramen too," Sayuri said, feeling the hunger creeping in despite her nerves.

As Mrs. Matsumoto placed her order at the counter, Sayuri's pulse raced. She watched her teacher with a mix of admiration and apprehension. When the steaming bowls arrived, Mrs. Matsumoto took a moment to arrange her chopsticks, then turned her attention back to Sayuri.

"Are you doing alright?" she asked, her tone gentle. "Is there anything you'd like to discuss?"

Sayuri hesitated, her mind racing. The idea of opening up felt both liberating and terrifying. "Um, I... I'm okay," she stammered, not wanting to divulge too much.

Mrs. Matsumoto leaned in slightly, her expression serious yet compassionate. "I want you to know that whatever you say is confidential. This isn't a teacher-student meeting. I'm here as a concerned citizen and... as a wife."

Sayuri's heart skipped a beat at the mention of "wife." Confusion washed over her.

"Wife? Of who?" she asked, confused.

"Of the bank Chairman," Mrs. Matsumoto replied, her voice steady.

The revelation hit Sayuri like a bolt of lightning. She felt her mouth go dry.

"The bank Chairman?" she echoed, her mind racing. The pieces began to fall into place, but she struggled to process the implications. Did that mean Mrs. Matsumoto knew about her father's debt? Did she know about her secret dealings with the Yakuza?

Mrs. Matsumoto watched her carefully, sensing Sayuri's conflict. "I understand this is a lot to take in," she said softly. "Take your time."

Sayuri focused on her bowl of ramen, her chopsticks moving mechanically as she tried to regain her composure. The steam rose from the bowl, filling her senses with comfort, yet her thoughts were a whirlwind. How could she respond to this unexpected honesty?

After a few moments, the weight of silence hung between them. Sayuri's mind shifted from shock to a yearning for connection. She thought of how alone she often felt in her struggles, and perhaps this was an opportunity to share her burden. Taking a deep breath, she finally spoke.

“I’ve been... dealing with a lot lately,” she admitted, her voice quiet but steady. “My family’s in trouble. My dad has debts, and I didn’t know what else to do. I didn’t know what was in the letter I delivered!”

Mrs. Matsumoto nodded, encouraging her to continue. “It’s OK. I’m not here to blame you for anything. What kind of trouble is your family in?”

Sayuri looked down at her ramen, the noodles swirling in the broth. “My dad’s in debt to the Yakuza,” she confessed, her voice barely above a whisper. “I started working for them to help pay it off. I didn’t really want to, but I felt like I had no choice.”

Mrs. Matsumoto’s expression shifted to one of understanding. “And how did you get involved?”

Sayuri’s words began to flow, the dam of her emotions breaking as she spoke.

“I was desperate to help my family. I set up a meeting with a guy I met who is quite high in the Yamaguchi-Gumi Yakuza. I thought I could just deliver messages, run errands... I didn’t realize I would be forced to be part of what happened to your husband. I am so sorry!” she said in earnest, briefly glancing up at Mrs. Matsumoto, then bowing an apology with her head down, embarrassed. “I don’t want to be part of that world, but I feel trapped.”

“I see,” Mrs. Matsumoto replied, her voice calm. “It’s a difficult position to be in, Sayuri. But you’re very brave for facing it head-on.”

Sayuri felt a warmth spread through her at the compliment, emboldening her to continue. “I’ve been so scared... I don’t want to disappoint my family, but I feel like I’m losing control. I wish I could find another way.”

Mrs. Matsumoto took a sip of her ramen, giving Sayuri a moment to gather her thoughts. “It’s okay to feel that way. You’re not alone in this. Many people face challenges that seem insurmountable. But you have options. You can find a way out.”

Sayuri nodded, her heart pounding. “I just... don’t know how. I feel like I’m in too deep.”

As they continued to eat, Sayuri opened up about her fears, her frustrations, and her desire to protect her family. Each word felt like a release, a weight lifted from her shoulders. Mrs. Matsumoto listened intently, her presence a comforting anchor amidst the storm of Sayuri’s emotions. After a while, Sayuri paused, feeling a sense of relief wash over her.

“Thank you for listening,” she said, her voice soft. “I didn’t think I could talk about this with anyone.”

Mrs. Matsumoto smiled gently. “I’m glad you did. Remember, you don’t have to face this alone. If you ever need help, don’t hesitate to reach out.”

Sayuri felt a flicker of hope igniting within her. Maybe this meeting could lead to something more than just a conversation. Perhaps there was a way out of the mess she found herself in, and maybe Mrs. Matsumoto could help her find it.

“Now, I suppose I should tell you how my husband got involved with the Yakuza, seeing that you have been open and straightforward with me,” she continued, emitting a small sigh and visibly bracing herself.

“It is not necessary, Mrs. Matsumoto. I don’t need to know,” Sayuri said respectfully.

“No, it’s not. But, like you, I have nobody I can discuss this with. Secrets can eat away at you unless you share them. It’s good for the soul,” she insisted.

“As you wish,” Sayuri conceded, bowing her head in respect.

“Let me start by telling you that I only found out about my husband’s Yakuza dealings when he came home missing one finger. I am sure that he has hidden many things from me over the years, but a missing finger is not easily hidden,” Mrs. Matsumoto said robotically, as if she had already resigned herself to her fate – the wife of a disgraced bank Chairman.

“Of course, he had no choice but to confess to me. It all started when my son, Shinji, approached Ken Watanabe with a business proposal.”

“Your son knows Ken Watanabe?” asked Sayuri, incredulously.

“Hai! They knew each other from Kobe. Ken’s cousin was Shinji’s best friend. My husband and I only moved to Tokyo when he got promoted to Chairman.”

“Sorry for interrupting,” Sayuri apologised. “I was just surprised.”

“Not a problem,” she smiled, “Can I assume that Ken Watanabe is the person you contacted?”

“Hai!” affirmed Sayuri, feeling embarrassed.

“Anyway, Shinji knew that Ken was involved in land swindles and wanted to act as a middleman between the Yakuza and the bank in a covert joint investment scheme – obviously because of his connection to both parties. It wasn’t the first time my husband had been asked to get involved in such dealings and he had always refused -up until then. He told himself that he was doing it to bolster the bank’s profitability, but, ultimately, it was just nepotism.”

As Mrs. Matsumoto spoke, Sayuri’s mind raced, grappling with the shocking revelations about the corrupt joint investment scheme involving her homeroom teacher’s husband and Ken Watanabe. Each word felt like a heavy weight pressing down on her as she processed the implications of their collusion. Fear gripped her heart as she thought about the stakes involved, realizing that her own actions had inadvertently thrust her into this dark world of power and greed.

The image of the *yubitsume* replayed in her mind, a stark reminder of the brutality lurking beneath the surface of the Yakuza’s operations. Desperation clawed at her, and she wondered if she could escape this nightmare or if it would swallow her whole.

“I don’t understand,” said Sayuri, “How did the scheme work?”

“Simply put, the Yakuza used intimidation tactics to pressure property owners into selling at low prices, while my husband used his influence to secure favourable loans for the acquisition. Then they would manipulate the land value through fraudulent appraisals and sell it. It was also a useful way for the Yakuza to launder money. A win-win situation for everyone involved.”

“I think I understand now. So, what went wrong?”

“My husband tried to hide the amount of profit they made and gave Ken false statements, not knowing that Ken has spies in the bank.”

“OK. That makes sense,” Sayuri said slowly as she processed the information. “Sumimasen, I know it is not my place to ask, but considering that you now know the truth, will you be staying married to your husband?”

“That is a weird question, Sayuri. Why do you ask?”

“Well, it’s just that, as I mentioned earlier, my parents are going through some problems and I sometimes think that my mother should divorce my father.”

“I see,” said Mrs. Matsumoto. “Relationships are a minefield. Especially marriage. It is much easier to break up with a boyfriend than a husband.”

“It’s not like I **want** my parents to get divorced! It just seems so unfair that she has to put up with his drinking and gambling. And I think he has a mistress too!” Sayuri blurted out, her emotional dam bursting once more.

“You certainly have been dealing with a lot, Sayuri. No wonder you lost your temper with Tomoko. A young girl like you shouldn’t have to deal with so much drama,” Mrs. Matsumoto sympathised, clasping one of Sayuri’s hands in hers. “There is no magic wand. Each situation is unique. I like to put myself in the other person’s shoes before I start judging - look at the situation from their perspective. You’re still very young Sayuri. Life gets very complicated the older you get. Try to remember that. To you, it seems very simple – you are either for someone – or against someone. It seems black and white. There are many shades in between.”

“Hai!” Sayuri acknowledged.

“But, to answer your question, I have thought about divorcing my husband. However, I don’t think divorce is the answer,” Mrs. Matsumoto said slowly, as if she had only just resolved not to get divorced.

“Why do you say that?” quizzed Sayuri, looking for some insight into the complications of marriage.

“Well, firstly, after so many years of marriage, I don’t know if my life will be any better as a middle-aged divorcee trying to survive on a teacher’s salary. I do love my husband, you know. He got greedy. That saddens me – but I know he loves me and will never cheat on me. We have a comfortable standard of living and we are respected as a couple.”

“And...?” prodded Sayuri, “You said firstly, so I assume there’s more.”

"I must say, Sayuri, I have never seen this side of you before," Mrs. Matsumoto smiled.

"Sumimasen. What do you mean?" asked Sayuri.

"You seem more confident now than I am used to. You have always been so shy and demure at school."

"Oh! I didn't realise. I'm sorry if I come across as forward Mrs. Matsumoto. I don't mean to," Sayuri apologised.

"No need to apologise, Sayuri san, a bit of confidence is exactly what you need at your age. Soon you will be a young woman faced with even more challenges than you have right now. Well, maybe not, but life certainly doesn't get easier. I'm glad you are maturing."

Sayuri blushed. She wasn't used to getting compliments. "Arigato gozaimasu!" she said, bowing her head.

OK. So, you want to hear the other reason. Are you aware of the divorce law in Japan?"

"No," replied Sayuri.

"Well, if both parties – husband and wife – mutually agree to get a divorce it is a fairly straightforward process. But...if I sue him for divorce, it becomes a long and messy proceeding, and I doubt there will be any chance of covering up his Yakuza dealings. He will be totally disgraced. I will be too. Things will go from bad to worse. I won't allow that to happen. Does that make it clearer for you?"

"Hai!" Sayuri replied, nodding, "Can I ask you a question?"

"Hai! Anything."

"Why did you want to meet with me? I would never have known that you were the Chairman's wife."

"I am concerned for you, Sayuri-chan. When my husband told me your name, I was shocked. I didn't believe him. But, after he described you, I knew it had to be you."

"How did he describe me?" Sayuri asked, intrigued.

Mrs Matsumoto grinned, "He said you were a little lost girl with intelligent brown eyes with an underlying strength and resilience. Gaman."

"Really?" Sayuri said in disbelief. "But there must be thousands of Sayuri Ichikawas in Tokyo. How did you know it was me?"

"Teachers know everything," she said in a mock conspirational tone, "I also heard the rumours that Tomoko was spreading. It had to be you."

"OK, that makes sense," said Sayuri.

"I haven't told my husband that I know you and I'm not planning to either. He's not a violent or vindictive man, but it will only complicate things. Besides, he's been keeping secrets from me, so I feel comfortable not telling him."

“Arigato gozaimasu!” Sayuri said, bowing her head deeply.

“Sayuri-chan, I *am* concerned that your involvement with the Yakuza is going to de-rail your studies. You have the ability to be anything you want to be. In 3 years, you will start university and, I think, by then, you will have some idea of what you want to study. Or do you already know?”

Sayuri’s froze. The question felt like a spotlight shining on her, illuminating a path she had no intention of taking. She forced a smile, hoping to mask her discomfort. “Um, I haven’t really thought about it yet,” she replied, keeping her voice light.

Mrs. Matsumoto tilted her head, concern flickering in her eyes. “You’re such a bright student, Sayuri. I know you have great potential. It’s important to start planning for your future.”

Sayuri’s mind swirled with thoughts of leaving school, of the plans she had that didn’t involve university. She could feel Mrs. Matsumoto’s gaze on her, searching for honesty. “I... I think I want to explore some options first,” she said, her voice wavering slightly. “Maybe travel a bit? See what’s out there?”

“Traveling sounds wonderful,” Mrs. Matsumoto replied, though Sayuri could sense her scepticism. “But studying is a valuable opportunity. It could open so many doors for you.”

Sayuri felt the weight of the moment pressing down on her. She didn’t want to share her real plans—her intentions to leave school and take on responsibilities at home. “I’m still figuring things out,” she said, her smile faltering. “You know how it is... just trying to keep my options open.”

Mrs. Matsumoto studied her for a moment, a flicker of understanding crossing her face. “I see. Just remember, Sayuri, whatever you choose, I believe in you. You have a bright future ahead.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Matsumoto,” Sayuri replied, her voice barely above a whisper, feeling a mixture of relief and unease. The truth hung in the air between them, unspoken and heavy, as she finished her bowl of ramen, her heart a storm of uncertainty.

CHAPTER 18

Sayuri stepped into Ken Watanabe's office, the air thick with tension. The dim light cast shadows across the room, making the space feel more intimate yet foreboding. Ken sat behind his desk, his expression grave as he looked up from a stack of papers.

"Report," he said, his voice steady but laced with urgency.

Taking a deep breath, Sayuri recounted her morning. "I spent a few hours in the Imperial Hotel lobby, just like you told me to. I ordered coffee and pretended to read." She fidgeted with the hem of her shirt, the weight of her mission pressing down on her.

"And?" Ken prompted, leaning forward, his gaze piercing.

"I followed the *shatei* you described. He left the hotel and went into a Chinese restaurant. I trailed him, but he slipped behind the counter and down some steps. I couldn't just lift the flap and follow." She hesitated, then added, "I ordered Mapo Tofu, but..."

Ken's brow furrowed; concern etched on his features. "You did well, Sayuri. It's good that you didn't push it."

"Thanks," she replied, but the praise felt hollow. Her chest tightened as she sensed that something significant was about to unfold.

Ken leaned back in his chair, contemplating. "The Mitsui-kai are making moves in Shibuya. I suspect they're planning something against the Yamaguchi-gumi within the next few months. We need to know what they're up to."

Sayuri felt a knot tighten in her stomach. "What do you want me to do?"

Ken's expression shifted to one of determination. "You'll need to train as a croupier. Apply for a job at their illegal casino. It's the only way we can infiltrate their operations."

Her heart sank. "But I... I've never worked in a casino before."

"That's why you'll train," he replied, his tone firm. "You'll learn the games, the procedures in one of our casinos. The Mitsui-kai use their casino for meetings, and you'll have the perfect opportunity to gather information. We need someone on the inside."

Sayuri bit her lip, grappling with the implications. "What if they find out I'm not... one of them?"

Ken's eyes softened slightly. "You're not one of them. But croupiers are in great demand and they won't pay much attention to you if you just keep quiet and do your job. They won't suspect you. You blend in, and that's an advantage. It's dangerous, but it's necessary. We need this intel, Sayuri."

She looked down, the swirling thoughts in her mind battling against the fear gnawing at her. "What if I can't do it?"

"You can," he insisted, his voice steady. "I believe in you. You start training this weekend. We'll prepare you."

Sayuri nodded slowly, feeling the heaviness of her decision settle on her shoulders. She had no choice now. The stakes were too high, and the world she had stumbled into was unforgiving. "Okay," she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper. "I'll do it."

Ken leaned back, a flicker of relief crossing his face. "Good. We'll get you ready. Remember, you're playing a part. Just keep your head down, observe, and report back to me."

As she left his office, Sayuri felt a mix of dread and resolve. The path ahead was fraught with uncertainty, but she knew she had to embrace it, so she steeled herself for the challenges to come.

As Sayuri and Aya walked home, the world around them transformed into a serene winter wonderland. A delicate layer of light snow dusted the rooftops, trees, and streets, creating a soft, white blanket that glistened under the faint glow of diffused sunlight. Each flake floated gently down, adding to the peaceful hush that enveloped the early evening. The air was crisp and refreshing, with a hint of pine lingering from nearby trees. Shadows danced playfully in the soft light, and the snow crunched softly beneath their feet, each step releasing a gentle whisper.

The branches of the trees were adorned with sparkling snow, resembling intricate lacework against the dusky sky. Windows of nearby homes glowed warmly, casting a cozy ambiance that contrasted beautifully with the cool, tranquil scene outside. The beauty of the snow-covered landscape felt almost magical, wrapping them in a moment of quiet joy as they made their way home.

Aya, her brows furrowed, broke the silence. "Sayuri, I feel like I never see you anymore," she complained, her tone a mix of frustration and longing. "It's like you've vanished into thin air since you started your new... job."

Sayuri looked down, guilt washing over her. "I'm sorry, Aya. It's just that I can't miss 'work,' you know? Things are really hectic right now."

Aya raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued. "How's the casino training going, then? Are you actually learning anything?"

Sayuri's face brightened a little as she recalled her recent experiences. "Actually, yes! I've become so good at chipping that I can now feel a stack of 20 chips without even looking."

Aya stared at her, confusion evident. "Chipping? What do you mean?"

With a quick breath, Sayuri explained, "Gambling chips are stacked in stacks of 20 to make it easier to count. When the roulette dealer clears the table after each spin, there's a person called a 'chipper' at each table. They need to see where the 'dolly' is placed and figure out which chips will be needed first for payouts."

Aya nodded slowly, trying to grasp the information. "Okay... but why is that important?"

"The odds are in the casino's favour, so the more spins that are completed in a day, the more money the casino makes. If the chipper is slow, it means less spins and less profit."

“It sounds complicated. And a lot of pressure!”

“I must admit, it hurts my brain,” laughed Sayuri, “And I have to also study my 17- and 35-times table. Maybe you can help me with my flashcards? Please, Aya!”

“Whoa! You’re talking Martian to me right now! Are you on drugs?” she teased.

“No, *baka*! Just come to my home for an hour and I’ll explain everything. Please, my friend,” Sayuri pleaded, batting her eyelashes at Aya.

“OK, I’ll come and help you for a bit. Not too long though. I have to help my mom with supper,” Aya relented.

The familiar scents of home wafted through the air as she opened the door and ushered Aya inside.

“Make yourself at home! I’ll grab the roulette multiplication flashcards,” Sayuri said, heading toward her room. As she rummaged through her desk, Aya leaned against the wall, arms crossed, a hint of concern on her face.

“Sayuri, how do you manage to do this roulette training five times a week without your parents knowing? Don’t they ever wonder where you are?”

Sayuri hesitated as she searched for the right words. “I told them I’m in a study group for the entrance exams,” she replied, trying to sound casual. “I told them that we go to the library together. I said it’s cheaper than *juku*.”

Aya raised an eyebrow, scepticism etched on her features. “A study group? But do your parents really believe that?”

Sayuri shrugged, trying to dismiss her friend’s concerns. “They’ve been busy with work and haven’t asked too many questions. I think they just want me to do well on the exams.”

“Sayuri-chan, you worry me. The entrance exams are next week. What if you don’t study enough?” Aya pressed, her worry palpable. “With all this roulette training it is going to be difficult for you to study. What if you do poorly on the entrance exams? You’ve worked so hard all these years!”

Sayuri turned to face Aya, the flashcards clutched in her hands. “I know, Aya. I’m still studying for the exams—really! I just have to balance both. It’s not like I’m ignoring my studies completely.”

Aya sighed, her expression softening. “I just don’t want you to fall behind, Sayuri. You’re so talented, and you deserve to go to a good high school.”

“I appreciate that, really,” Sayuri said, forcing a smile. “But I promise I’m managing it all. I’ll study hard for the entrance exams, and I’ll still get my training in. It’s just time management.”

With a reluctant nod, Aya let the topic drop, and Sayuri felt a wave of relief wash over her. She didn’t want to burden her friend with the truth of her situation—not yet.

“Okay, enough about that! Let’s get to these flashcards,” Sayuri said, trying to lighten the mood. “Let me explain why I need your help with this.”

“I’m all ears,” said Aya.

“I can see that,” laughed Sayuri, lightly touching one of Aya’s ears.

“Funny girl! You should have been a mushroom,” said Aya, feigning indignation.

“Now you’ve lost me completely. Mushroom?”

“And I thought you were clever,” teased Aya, shaking her head in playful disappointment. “Mushroom – fungi – funny guy...”

“That’s a terrible joke,” said Sayuri playfully.

Aya picked up a card and squinted at it. “Alright, let’s see what you’ve got. Tell me what I must do!”

Sayuri laughed, grateful for the shift in conversation. “Okay, so first, you need to understand how to multiply the payouts for inside bets. If you bet on a straight-up number, you get a payout of 35 to 1. This is the highest paying bet and punters are allowed to put 20 chips on a straight-up bet, which means I must learn my 35 times table up to 35x20.”

“Phew! That sounds difficult,” admitted Aya.

“Yes, it is. But I also need to learn my 17-time table,” Sayuri continued.

“Why?”

“Because if you place a chip between two numbers and you win, it pays 17 to 1. It’s called a split bet.”

“Wow,” Aya said, her eyes wide with fascination. “That sounds complicated.”

“It’s really just a case of learning it parrot-fashion. At least there are no formulas to remember.”

“Yes. Thank goodness!” agreed Aya. “So, what do you need me to do?”

“Hold the flashcards up and I will read the equation and give you an answer. The correct answer is written on the back of each flashcard. Just tell me if I am correct or not, then place the cards in 2 piles – right and wrong. The goal is to get through all 40 cards without a mistake. It’s just a case of repetition,” explained Sayuri.

“Ok. Sounds simple enough. Let’s begin.”

As they delved into the world of roulette multiplication, Sayuri felt a sense of normalcy return. But deep down, she knew the complexity of her life was only beginning to unfold, and the secrets she was keeping weighed heavily on her heart. Thirty minutes later, Aya told Sayuri that she had to go home soon to help her mother.

“Ok. Thank you for helping me, my friend. It’s been a while since we hung out,” said Sayuri.

“My pleasure, Sayuri-chan! I never realised how complicated gambling was. It seems like it takes a lot of work to become a croupier,” she said, admiration in her voice.

“It does! But it’s exciting,” Sayuri admitted, a hint of pride in her voice. “You have to multitask like crazy. I’ve been practicing a lot. Sometimes I don’t even think about it; I just do it.”

Aya glanced sideways at Sayuri, her expression shifting. “It sounds like you’re enjoying your training.”

Sayuri hesitated, the weight of her double life pressing on her. “I guess I am. It’s just... different. But I still miss hanging out with you.”

“Then let’s make a plan,” Aya suggested, her enthusiasm returning. “We’ll do something fun once your training settles down. I want to hear more about this ‘chipping’ thing—maybe I can come watch you in action?”

Sayuri chuckled, though a shadow lingered in her heart. “I don’t think you’d want to see that side of things, Aya. It’s not exactly a normal job.”

“Normal is overrated!” Aya shot back, her laughter infectious. “Just promise me we won’t drift apart. I need my best friend.”

Sayuri nodded, determination rising within her. “I promise, Aya. We’ll make it work.”

As she walked Aya to the front door, Sayuri allowed herself to forget the secrets she was keeping. She cherished the warmth of their friendship, even as the shadows of her new life threatened to close in.

CHAPTER 19

Sayuri was feeling weary as she trundled home in the drizzling rain. Her long days at school and at croupier training were beginning to take their toll on her.

I'll just rest for 10 minutes before I start with the flashcards, she told herself, as she flopped onto her soft, warm bed. Her heavy eyelids threatened to close as she lay on her bed listening to the rain pattering against the bedroom window, creating a sombre backdrop, accentuating her desire to sleep.

As she glanced around her room absent-mindedly, it suddenly struck her that her diary was not where she had left it – she could see it lying on her desk, partially obscured by a stack of textbooks, and not in her desk drawer where she usually left it. *I must be so tired that I'm forgetting things*, she surmised, getting up off the bed to put it back where it belonged.

Well, now that I'm up, I guess it is a good time to make today's entry, she told herself as she sat down on her desk chair. Selecting a pen from the plastic yellow Mickey Mouse mug she used for her pens and pencils, she opened her diary and re-read her last entry.

February 21st, 1991

Today was intense. My croupier training was more challenging than ever, but I can feel myself getting better. We focused on roulette and the art of chipping. It's incredible how quickly I can now pick up chips without even thinking about it—I'm starting to feel the rhythm of the table.

During practice, I managed to handle a busy table without help from the other trainees. The dealer was impressed. I could see the payouts and anticipate the colour stacks before they were even cleared. It's exhilarating, but also nerve-wracking; I have to keep my head clear while the pressure builds around me.

I overheard some of the older croupiers talking about how well I am doing. It makes me feel good and fuels my determination to learn everything I can. If I'm going to be a part of this world, I need to be sharp and ready.

Still, I can't shake the feeling of guilt. I wish I could tell Keiko what I'm really doing. She thinks I'm just studying for high school entrance exams, and it feels wrong to keep this from her. I hope she doesn't find out the truth about my training—or worse, my plans to leave school. For now, I'll focus on my training and try to find a way to balance everything. I just hope I can keep all my secrets safe.

— S.

Then, in Keiko's handwriting, was a short line written in pencil.

"I left your diary out on purpose. We need to talk.

-K."

The thought of Keiko finding her diary sent a shiver of anxiety through her. She was afraid of the judgment that might come now that her true intentions had been discovered. But deep down, Sayuri knew that she missed her sister. The laughter, the late-night talks—they all felt like distant memories. Sayuri had always cherished the bond she shared with her sister, Keiko. Growing up, they exchanged secrets in the quiet corners of their home, sharing everything from crushes to dreams for the future.

But since Keiko had started high school, life began to pull them in different directions. Sayuri found herself deeply immersed in her secret training as a croupier, a path that felt exciting yet isolating. Meanwhile, Keiko focused on her studies and the mounting pressures of high school. The distance between them grew, and Sayuri often felt like she was losing her sister to a world she didn't understand. Sure, she had Aya, but even that relationship was difficult to maintain, given the lack of time they spent together.

In that moment, she resolved to be brave. She wanted to share her secrets with her sister regardless of how she would react. In a way, she was glad that Keiko had read her diary. Keeping secrets from loved ones was a heavy burden to bear. She hoped that by being honest about her struggles and decisions, they could rebuild their bond and face the challenges ahead together.

February 22nd, 1991

Today, my sister, Keiko, read my diary. She wants to talk. I am nervous, but I know it has to be done.

-S

With newfound determination, she closed her diary, believing that their connection was still strong and worth fighting for. They had always shared secrets, but lately, Sayuri had deemed her secrets to be too heavy for Keiko to handle, resulting in Keiko becoming distant, almost resentful of Sayuri's withdrawal into her private world. *What if this is her way of trying to understand what is happening in my life?* Sayuri deliberated.

Determined, Sayuri headed to Keiko's room, her heart pounding. As she knocked gently on the door, she called out, "Keiko? Are you in there?"

"Yeah, just a minute!" came Keiko's voice from within.

"Hey, Sayuri-chan! What's up?" Keiko said in a fake display of nonchalance as she opened her bedroom door.

"I noticed what you wrote in my diary," Sayuri simply said.

Keiko paused for a moment, the playful tone in her voice fading. "Oh... you saw that, huh?"

Sayuri took a deep breath, feeling the weight of the moment. "I did. I'm glad you left it out. *We do* we need to talk."

There was a brief silence before Keiko opened the door fully, her expression shifting from feigned indifference to genuine concern. "Okay, come in."

As Sayuri stepped into the room, she noticed the posters on Keiko's walls, reminders of the sisterly bond they once shared. "I'm sorry for keeping things from you," Sayuri began,

her voice steadying. "I should have told you about my training. It's just... I didn't want you to worry."

Keiko crossed her arms, her brow furrowed. "Worry? Sayuri, I feel shut out. We used to share everything. Now it feels like you're living a whole different life without me."

"I know," Sayuri replied, her tone remorseful. "I didn't mean to push you away. I told myself I was protecting you, but I realize now that I was just scared, and all I did was make things worse. I really miss you. I'm sorry Keiko-chan."

Keiko softened, and the tension in the room eased slightly. "I miss you too. But you have to understand, I need to know what's going on with you. I can't help if I don't know."

Sayuri nodded, feeling a rush of relief. "Okay, let me explain. I've been training to be a croupier. It's intense and exciting, but it's also scary."

"Yes, I saw that in your diary."

"How much did you read?" quizzed Sayuri.

"The last 2 months, since you started withdrawing from me," Keiko said guiltily. Sayuri thought deeply for a moment, then said,

"OK. Firstly, you may be my older sister, but you swore to me that you would never read my diary."

"But I was...." Started Keiko.

"Wait! Let me finish."

"Sumimasen!"

"I do, however, realise that you only did it because you care for me. I didn't realise that my behaviour had changed so drastically that you thought it necessary to break your promise to me. But I'm glad you did," she smiled, impulsively hugging Keiko.

"Who *are* you?" Keiko laughed, as she hugged her back, "You're not a hugger Sayuri-chan!"

"I'm evolving," said Sayuri smiling affectionately at her sister.

"Yes, I guess you are," said Keiko appreciatively, "You're growing up fast, sister," her expression earnest. "You're my sister, Sayuri. I want to be part of your life, no matter what choices you make. Just promise me you'll be honest with me from now on."

Sayuri felt a surge of gratitude. "I promise. I want us to be close again. I want to share everything, the good and the bad."

With a tentative smile, Keiko reached out and pulled Sayuri into another hug. "Then let's start fresh. You can tell me everything about your training, and I'll share what's going on in my life too."

As they embraced, Sayuri felt the heavy burden of secrets lift. Together, they could face whatever challenges lay ahead, their bond stronger than ever.

The classroom buzzed with a mix of nervous energy and anticipation as Mrs. Matsumoto sat at her desk, reviewing the exam results. The week after the high school entrance exams was a pivotal time for her students, and she had decided to use the double period to meet with each one individually.

“Ichikawa, Sayuri. Please come to my desk,” Mrs. Matsumoto called out, her voice steady and warm. Sayuri glanced over at her classmates, who were either engrossed in their own conversations or anxiously awaiting their turn. Taking a deep breath, she made her way to the front, heart pounding.

Mrs. Matsumoto greeted her with a smile, but there was an intensity in her eyes that made Sayuri feel both comforted and apprehensive. “Sit down, Sayuri. Let’s talk about your results.”

Sayuri sat, her hands resting on her lap. Mrs. Matsumoto’s expression shifted slightly. “I’m afraid I have some disappointing news. You missed the passing mark by just 1%.”

Sayuri felt the floor drop beneath her. “1%?” she echoed, her heart sinking. “That’s so close...”

“Yes, but there’s more to this story,” Mrs. Matsumoto continued. “I’ve spoken with the vice-principals and the principal. Given your excellent academic record over the past three years, they’ve agreed to hold an interview with you. This will count towards their final decision on whether to give you a passing mark.”

Sayuri’s heart raced. This was a chance, but it wasn’t the future she had envisioned. Taking a deep breath, she decided it was time to be honest. “Mrs. Matsumoto, I need to tell you something. I’m not planning to go to high school this year.”

The surprise on Mrs. Matsumoto’s face was palpable. “What do you mean?” she asked gently, leaning forward.

“I want to work for a year to help my family. I’ve thought a lot about it, and I believe it’s the best choice for us right now. But I definitely plan to start high school next year,” Sayuri explained, her voice steady despite the turmoil inside her.

Mrs. Matsumoto took a moment to absorb what Sayuri had said. “I understand, Sayuri. You must do what you think is best. Just remember that I am always available if you need advice—or just someone to talk to.”

“*Arigatou gozaimasu!*” Sayuri replied, relief flooding through her. The support in Mrs. Matsumoto’s voice reassured her more than she had expected.

Mrs. Matsumoto reached for a Post-it note and began to scribble her landline phone number. “It’s best that you don’t phone my house, but if you need me during school break, get one of your friends to call.”

Sayuri nodded, her heart swelling with gratitude. “Thank you! What should they say if your husband answers?”

Mrs. Matsumoto chuckled lightly. “I doubt he will; he’s rarely at home. But they can just say they’re calling from the library. I read a lot—it’s a teacher thing.”

“Hai!” Sayuri replied, a small smile breaking through her earlier anxiety.

As she stood to leave, Mrs. Matsumoto added, “And remember, Sayuri, it’s okay to take a different path. Just make sure you keep your dreams alive.”

Sayuri nodded, feeling a mixture of determination and uncertainty. As she walked back to her seat, she felt lighter, knowing she had Mrs. Matsumoto’s support. The future was still unclear, but at least she no longer felt alone in her decision.

CHAPTER 20

The sun threatened to break through the clouds as Yoko and Sayuri strolled through Shinjuku Gyoen Park, the air crisp with the promise of spring. Cherry blossoms were just beginning to bloom, their delicate petals unfurling like whispers of pink against the blue sky. The trees stood adorned with clusters of soft blooms, creating a picturesque scene that felt almost magical on this first day of blooming, March 15th.

“We always used to enjoy *hanami* under the cherry blossoms, celebrating the beauty of the flowers with friends and family. Do you remember, Sayuri-chan?” Yoko asked.

“Hai! We used to have big picnics and Atsuko always took a spool of cherry blossom photos. She must have a whole box of them by now,” Sayuri commented.

They found a bench beneath one of the cherry trees, the ground scattered with fallen petals. Yoko set down the bento boxes she had prepared, filled with rice, grilled fish, and pickled vegetables, while Sayuri took a seat beside her, her mind a jumble of thoughts. As they began to eat, Yoko watched her daughter closely.

“I’ve been meaning to ask; how have you been feeling about everything after the entrance exams? You seem a bit distant.”

Sayuri paused, her chopsticks hovering above her rice. “Everything is fine, Mom. I’ve just been thinking a lot about my future.”

“Are you sure that’s all it is, Sayuri-chan? I’m your mother; you can tell me anything,” Yoko pressed gently, her concern evident.

Sayuri let out a heavy sigh, the weight of her secret pressing down on her. “I failed my high school entrance exams.”

“What? How is that possible? You have always done well academically. Didn’t you also have a study group?” Yoko’s voice trembled with disbelief.

“Sumimasen! Forgive me, Mom. I lied about that.” Sayuri’s voice was barely above a whisper.

“You lied! Sayuri-chan! You had better tell me what is going on in your life right now!” Yoko ordered, her tone a mix of urgency and worry.

Taking a deep breath, Sayuri confessed, “I’ve been training as a croupier for the Yakuza to pay off Dad’s debt.”

Yoko’s expression shifted from shock to a mixture of concern and understanding.

“I invited you to the park because I suspected you were doing something to pay off the debt. All mothers were once teenagers,” she said, her voice softening. “But what kind of deal have you made with the Yakuza?”

“I’m a trainee croupier. I’ll finish training in two weeks,” Sayuri explained, her heart pounding.

“How long do you have to work for them to pay off the debt?” Yoko asked, her brow furrowing.

“I don’t know. They haven’t told me,” Sayuri replied, her voice shaking.

“Are you happy? Do you have any concerns about working for the Yakuza?” Yoko’s voice was filled with motherly worry.

Sayuri hesitated, searching for the right words. “Ken Watanabe, my ‘boss,’ treats me well. He said I can keep any money I make as a croupier as long as I act as an informant.”

Yoko’s face paled. “You’re going to be a spy for the Yamaguchi-gumi clan? No, Sayuri! You mustn’t continue with this croupier training. I’ll ask my parents for more money.”

Anger flared within Sayuri. “You can’t just ask for more money, Mom! I overheard you on the phone with Grandma. She said you can’t ask for more money unless you divorce Dad!”

Yoko’s eyes widened in shock. “So, you heard that...”

“Yes, and I don’t want my parents to get divorced!” Sayuri shouted, frustration boiling over. “I’m trying to help our family, and you’re prepared to divorce Dad just because you don’t trust me! What do you think I’m doing this for?”

Yoko took a deep breath, trying to calm the rising tension. “I just want you to be safe. This isn’t the life I envisioned for you.”

Sayuri stood up, her anger bubbling over. “You think I wanted any of this? I’m doing what I have to do!” She turned away, staring at the blooming cherry blossoms, their beauty stark against her turmoil.

“Sayuri, please,” Yoko pleaded, her voice breaking. “We can find another way. I’ll figure something out. Just don’t get involved with them.”

Sayuri remained silent, her heart heavy with the weight of her choices. The cherry blossoms danced in the breeze, a reminder of the fleeting beauty of life, but all she felt was the heaviness of the burdens she carried.

“There is no other way, mom. I know it is your job to worry about me, but I’m not a baby anymore. I can look after myself. I love you – and Dad – but I need to do this,” Sayuri insisted.

“Sayuri-chan! It is my job to protect you. I don’t want you working for the Yakuza. It is a dangerous world. Please!”

“Mom, I promise I will be fine. It is just a different type of job than most people have. I’m not a gangster, I’m a croupier. Besides, everyone is searched for weapons before they are allowed to enter the casino. It’s very safe.”

“My stubborn Sayuri-chan. I know if I force you to give it up it will backfire on me. You’ll just find another way to pay off the debt. I guess there is nothing I can do except worry about you.”

“Mom, I’m telling you – it’s completely safe. I know it is worrying for you, but I’ll be fine. I promise to leave if anything scary happens, OK?”

“Please do Sayuri-chan,” said Yoko, her eyes pleading with her daughter.

Sayuri lay a hand on top of her mother’s hand and said kindly, “This is temporary, mom. Next year, I will be in high school, and all of this will just be a bad memory.”

Yoko looked deeply into her daughter’s eyes and finally said, “I hope so dear – I really hope so.”

The spring air was tinged with the faint scent of cherry blossoms as the Ichikawa family walked to the middle school graduation ceremony on the last Friday of the academic year. Sayuri loved springtime. The contrast between a snowy landscape and one filled with spring cherry blossoms was striking. The quiet stillness of winter, with its white blanket muffling sounds, often made her introspective and solitary. In contrast, the vibrant pink of cherry blossoms heralded warmth and renewal, sparking joy and a sense of rebirth.

This seasonal shift lifted her mood and mirrored the emotional trajectory she had travelled in the last few months, transforming the heaviness of winter’s chill into the lightness of spring’s promise.

Sayuri sat in the front row, feeling strangely calm. The gymnasium was filled with families and friends, each buzzing with pride for their graduates. Colourful banners hung from the ceiling, proclaiming *Congratulations!* and *Well Done!* in bright letters.

As the principal called each name, the atmosphere became electric. Sayuri’s name finally echoed through the room, and she stood, her legs shaking. Blending into the background was her preferred default mode, and having to be the focus of attention of so many strangers made her feel uncomfortable and very self-conscious.

She walked across the stage, her black robe swaying gently, and accepted her diploma from the principal, an embarrassed smile breaking across her face. The audience erupted in applause, and she caught sight of her family in the crowd—Keiko beaming, Atsuko wiping away a tear, Yoko nodding with pride, and Takeshi standing a bit apart, a complex mixture of pride and guilt etched on his face.

“Congratulations, Sayuri!” Keiko shouted, waving enthusiastically. Sayuri smiled back, her heart swelling at the sight of her sister's excitement.

As the ceremony concluded, everyone filtered into the gym for refreshments. Tables were laden with trays of snacks—sandwiches, fruit, and an array of soft drinks. The atmosphere was cheerful, yet Takeshi felt a weight pressing on his chest. He knew Sayuri's decision to take a year off school was linked to him, and while he was proud of her achievement, guilt gnawed at him.

“Hey, you did great up there!” Yoko said, wrapping an arm around Sayuri as they moved toward the food tables.

“Thanks, Mom! I can't believe it's finally over,” Sayuri replied, her voice a mixture of relief and excitement. Atsuko approached, holding a plate piled with finger foods. “We're all so proud of you, Sayuri.”

“Arigatou gozaimasu!” she beamed at her oldest sister.

Takeshi, standing a few steps away, remained silent. He felt he should join in the conversation, but he was struggling to find something meaningful to say and was also a bit nervous about drawing attention to himself. His failures loomed over him like a shadow, and he decided it was best to beat himself up in silence.

Just then, Aya and her parents approached, carrying plates of snacks.

“Sayuri! Congratulations!” Aya exclaimed, her smile bright. “We're so proud of you!”

“Thanks, Aya! I can't believe we're done with middle school,” Sayuri replied, her face lighting up.

“Next stop, high school!” Aya's parents chimed in, beaming with pride.

“Not for me,” Sayuri said, forcing a smile. “I'm taking a different path.”

Aya's mother looked briefly concerned but quickly masked it with a smile.

“Well, we're eager to see what you do next!”

As the chatter continued, Takeshi felt a pang of guilt. He stepped forward, trying to join the conversation. “You're going to do amazing things, Sayuri,” he said, his voice steady but his heart uneasy.

“Thanks, Dad,” she replied, looking him in the eye. “I hope so.”

Keiko, sensing the tension, jumped in. “Let's take a family picture! Everyone, gather around!”

They all huddled together, positioning themselves for the photo. Sayuri felt the warmth of her family surrounding her, and for a moment, the worries about her future faded

away. As the camera clicked, she smiled genuinely, hoping this moment would hold them together, even as the paths ahead diverged. After the photo, they returned to the snacks.

“What’s your favourite?” Keiko asked, holding up a plate of fruit.

“Definitely the melon!” Sayuri exclaimed, grabbing a piece.

“Melon it is!” Keiko laughed, passing her the plate.

As laughter filled the gym, Takeshi watched his daughters, feeling a bittersweet mix of pride and failure wash over him. He hoped that despite everything, they would always find their way back to each other, even as their lives took unexpected turns.

CHAPTER 21

The air inside the dimly lit casino was thick with tension and the faint scent of smoke. Sayuri stood at the roulette table, her heart steady despite the chaos surrounding her. The soft clinking of chips and murmurs of anticipation filled the room.

She took a deep breath, her fingers brushing against the smooth, polished wooden surface of the wheel. With a practiced motion, she spun the ball in the groove of the roulette wheel, watching it dance along the edge. The anticipation in the air was palpable as the patrons leaned in closer.

“No more bets please!” Sayuri shouted as the punters elbowed each other in one last desperate attempt to place their bets before the ball dropped. The ball clattered against the numbered pockets before finally settling on 29.

“Winner, 29 black!” she announced, her voice clear and authoritative. The players erupted in cheers and groans, but she quickly focused on the task at hand. She began clearing the table, meticulously collecting losing bets and urging her chipper, a nervous newcomer, to move faster. “Hurry up! We’re slowing the game down!” she urged, her tone firm yet composed.

As she prepared to make the payout, her eyes flickered across the table, spotting the yellow chips that marked the biggest win. Thirteen 100-yen chips had been placed straight up on 29. With a swift motion, she pushed out the stacks of chips: two stacks of 1,000 yen each, five 1000-yen chips on top, plus a single 500-yen chip, totalling 45,500 yen. The chips clinked together, a sound that echoed her mixed feelings of pride and tension. As she waited for the punters to place their bets for the next spin, her gaze wandered through the dark corners of the casino.

Her heart sank when she spotted her father seated at one of the pachinko machines along the far wall, his left hand resting on the thigh of his mistress. They laughed together, oblivious to the world around them, and the sight twisted something deep inside Sayuri. He was drunk again, she noted bitterly, the way his fingers brushed against the woman’s shoulder sending a rush of anger through her veins.

Her father had no idea she was working for the Mitsui-kai clan, a stark contrast to the Yamaguchi-gumi he owed money to. It was obvious that Takeshi had no intention of keeping his promises to her and her mother. Instead of stepping up and being responsible, he had simply swapped one casino for another, thinking that he would not be found out. The thought sent a rush of frustration coursing through her, but she knew she had to keep it together.

With a forced smile, she turned back to the table, maintaining her composure as she retrieved the ball from the number 29 slot on the roulette wheel and gave it a long, hard spin. She couldn’t afford to blow her cover—not now, not ever. The casino continued to pulse around her, but her focus remained sharp, her emotions locked away behind a mask of professionalism. As the ball slowed, she kept one eye on the wheel and the other on her father, the weight of her secret pressing down on her. The game continued, and so did the façade.

Sayuri stood at the blackjack table, the familiar rhythm of the game providing a backdrop to her swirling thoughts. Each shuffle of the cards felt mechanical, her mind elsewhere. She couldn't shake the image of her father, drunk and laughing with his mistress, playing pachinko and drinking in the dingy corner of the illegal casino. The sight had ignited a storm of anger and disappointment within her, a tempest that clouded her focus.

How could he be so reckless? she thought, bitterness rising in her throat. *Does he even care about us?* The weight of his betrayal felt heavy, almost suffocating. Sayuri's hands moved instinctively, dealing cards, but her heart was far from the game.

Just as she was about to lose herself in her thoughts again, two *shatei* from the Mitsui-kai clan approached her table. They were familiar faces, often seen at informal meetings in the VIP bar—a mix of arrogance and casual confidence radiating from them. They threw a stack of cash onto the table, the crisp notes spreading out like a challenge.

Sayuri quickly gathered the money and exchanged the cash for stacks of chips, counting each one with precision. She paused, ensuring the table inspector was watching, her instincts kicking in to maintain the integrity of the game. *Focus, Sayuri!* she reminded herself.

"50,000-yen cash buy-in!" she announced, her voice steady despite the chaos in her mind. The inspector nodded, acknowledging the transaction, and she felt a small surge of relief. With practiced ease, she pushed out two and a half stacks of 1,000-yen chips, each stack neatly aligned. The *shatei* settled in, their casual banter filling the air as they prepared to play. She forced herself to maintain a straight face, the dealer's mask firmly in place, but her ears perked up, drawn into their conversation.

Sayuri's interest in them was waning as they chatted sporadically about their recent conquests with the many 'gangster groupies' that frequented their nightclubs and clan parties, until one of them said, "Did you hear about the situation with Takuya?" his voice low and conspiratorial. He was a burly man with a tattoo snaking up his neck and when he grinned, the sight of his one gold-plated front tooth sent shivers along Sayuri's spine.

"Yeah, it's getting messy," the other replied, glancing around as if ensuring no one was listening. "He thinks he can play both sides. But word is, the boss isn't happy about it."

What are they talking about? Sayuri wondered, her heart quickening, a mix of intrigue and apprehension washing over her. She continued dealing the cards, her hands moving with mechanical precision, but her mind was now fully engaged.

"Ken Watanabe is not someone you want to betray," the first *shatei* added, a smirk creeping onto his face. "If Takuya doesn't watch his back, he'll end up as a cautionary tale."

Sayuri's pulse raced. This was information Ken needed to know, but the thought of betraying Takuya, someone she knew personally, felt like a betrayal of her own values. Yet, she reminded herself of her position—she was a spy, after all.

As the cards flipped over, she fought to keep her expression neutral. The weight of her father's actions faded momentarily, replaced by the urgency of the conversation before her. The stakes of her own life felt intertwined with the rumours swirling around her, and she couldn't help but wonder how much longer she could navigate this dangerous world without losing herself completely. Each round of blackjack became a delicate dance between her personal turmoil and the harsh reality of the life she had chosen.

"He's been feeding us information about Ken Watanabe. Apparently, he's tired of being a *shatei* and wants to take Ken out of the picture."

"Really?" the other man replied, a leaner figure adjusting his cap. "That's risky. You think he's got enough pull to make it happen?"

"It's tricky. If he's got the right connections, he could get promoted in no time. I think Watanabe's been too soft on him. Takuya wants to climb the ranks, and this is his chance."

Sayuri's mind raced as she processed the conversation. Takuya had always seemed ambitious, but she never imagined he would resort to such betrayal. Not only would it cause a major upheaval within the ranks of the Yamaguchi-gumi clan, but it would personally affect Sayuri's life if Ken Watanabe was no longer the Tokyo boss.

CHAPTER 22

Sayuri sat on the bus, the echo of the blackjack table still ringing in her ears. The conversation she overheard tormented her thoughts, the words of the Mitsui-kai *shatei* replaying like a broken record. She needed to share it with Ken—he needed to know about Takuya’s betrayal. She felt a sense of urgency, believing that if Takuya was successful in overthrowing Ken, she would be in danger.

Her dayshift had ended at 8pm, so she was confident that Ken would still be in his office by the time she got there. Running the Tokyo branch of the Yamaguchi-gumi was a full-time job. Fifteen minutes later, she found herself in Ken Watanabe’s office, the dim light casting shadows across the room. Ken sat behind his desk, his expression unreadable as she relayed what she had heard.

“Sumimasen! I have come to report what I have heard today, Oyabun!”

“Sayuri. You look troubled. What is it?”

“Takuya is trying to play both sides,” she said, her voice trembling slightly. “He’s feeding information to the Mitsui-kai. He’s looking to replace you.”

At first, Ken’s face remained impassive, but then his eyes narrowed, a storm brewing within. “You’re sure about this?” he snapped, leaning forward.

“Yes,” Sayuri insisted, feeling a mix of fear and determination. “I heard it with my own ears.”

Ken’s fury erupted like a volcano. He stood, slamming his hand on the desk. “Get out! I need to deal with this myself.”

As she exited, a knot of anxiety twisted in her stomach. She didn’t know how this would unfold, but she felt a sense of dread settling in.

Minutes later, Takuya found himself summoned to Ken’s office. He entered, sensing the tension in the air. Ken’s expression was hard, his jaw clenched.

“Takuya,” Ken said, his voice low and dangerous. “I’ve been told you’ve been feeding information to the Mitsui-kai. Is it true?”

Takuya looked bewildered. “What? No! Never! I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Ken’s eyes blazed with anger. “So you’re innocent? You expect me to believe that? You think I won’t deal with a traitor?”

“I swear, Oyabun! I haven’t done anything!” Takuya pleaded, desperation creeping into his voice. “You have to believe me!”

In a flash of rage, Ken lunged forward, his fist connecting with Takuya’s jaw. Takuya stumbled, shocked but still insisting on his innocence.

“You’re crazy! I’m not a traitor!”

Ken's fury didn't abate. He pulled out a *deba* knife, the blade glinting ominously in the low light. "Let's see how innocent you are."

Before Takuya could react, Ken slashed the knife across his cheek. Blood immediately seeped from the wound, dripping down Takuya's face. He shouted in pain, anger surging through him.

"Believe me! I have never betrayed you! Do you think I am that stupid? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Prove your loyalty, Takuya!" Ken shouted back, his voice cutting.

"I'll do anything, boss! Please! Let me prove my loyalty!" Takuya shouted desperately.

"Anything, hey? Ok, I have a small problem that needs to be taken care of. Then we'll see where your loyalties lie."

Takuya's heart sank. "Anything," he said again, his voice a mix of defiance and fear.

Ken's expression hardened. "I'll give you the details and you'll take care of it, or you'll find out just how far my wrath can go."

The room grew heavy with tension, and Takuya felt a cold dread settle in his stomach. He knew he had to comply, but he really hoped that it wasn't another killing. That would weigh heavily on his conscience. After all the wet work he had done as a *kobun*, he wanted to leave that life behind. He had earned his stripes. Or so he had thought.

Sayuri was beside herself as she stared blankly out the bus window. She was now in an untenable position. If Takuya was guilty, Ken might have him killed. If he was innocent, Takuya would forever see her as the one who betrayed him, and the cruel irony twisted in her gut. She had unknowingly chained him to a path of violence and betrayal, all while trying to protect herself.

"What have I done?" she thought, her heart heavy with the burden of her actions. The lines between loyalty and betrayal blurred, and she felt trapped in a web of her own making, one that would forever alter her relationship with Takuya.

Keiko sat cross-legged on Sayuri's bed, the soft glow of a bedside lamp casting warm light across the room. The posters that adorned the walls, remnants of a childhood that felt worlds away from the troubling reality Sayuri faced. She could feel the weight of her thoughts pressing down on her, and Keiko's presence was a comfort she desperately needed.

"Sayuri, you promised that if something was bothering you, you'd talk to me," Keiko said, her voice gentle yet encouraging. "What's going on?"

Taking a deep breath, Sayuri finally spoke, her voice shaky. "I overheard some Mitsui-kai gangsters talking at the casino. They said Takuya was playing both sides and feeding information to them. So, I... I told Ken Watanabe about it."

Keiko's brows furrowed in concern. "What do you think might happen to Takuya?"

Sayuri looked away, her heart heavy. "I have no idea, but I hope the worst case would be *yubitsume*."

"What's that?" Keiko asked, her curiosity piqued.

Sayuri swallowed hard, the word tasting bitter on her tongue. "It's a ritual where Yakuza members cut off part of their finger to prove their loyalty after a mistake. It's brutal, but... it's also a way to show they're serious about their commitment to the clan."

Keiko's eyes widened; her shock evident. "My sweet little sister, what a brutal world you have got yourself mixed up in. Don't you think you've done enough for the Yakuza? Surely, dad's debt is paid off by now?"

The mention of their father sent a jolt of pain through Sayuri, and she felt tears welling up. "He was at the casino... with his mistress," she confessed, her voice breaking. "I can't believe he would do that."

"Sayuri..." Keiko said softly, reaching out to squeeze her hand, you can't tell mom. If you tell her about dad and his mistress, it'll just cause a huge mess. They might get divorced, especially if gambling is involved."

Sayuri looked contemplative, weighing the situation. "You're probably right. It would just hurt Mom more than anything. Let's keep this between us for now, okay?"

Sayuri nodded, feeling a sense of relief mixed with regret. She took a deep breath, trying to calm the storm inside her. "Can we talk about something else?" she asked, eager to change the subject. "How are things at school?"

Keiko's expression brightened. "I'm loving being a *ninensei*! Look at my new skirt!" She stood up and twirled, showing off the short hem that danced around her thighs. "Now all the boys can see how sexy my legs really are!" She laughed; the sound infectious.

Sayuri couldn't help but smile, the lightness of Keiko's spirit lifting her mood. "You're going to give them all heart attacks," she teased.

Keiko grinned. "And Tomoko is still trying to bully girls at school, even though she's just a first-year. Can you believe it?"

Sayuri rolled her eyes. "I'd be quite happy never to see Tomoko again."

"I know, right? But she just can't help herself," Keiko said with a laugh. "Oh, and I saw Atsuko. She popped in at the house to visit mom and dad. She's doing well in her first year at university, living in the dorms now."

"Really? I'm sorry I missed seeing her," Sayuri said, a touch of regret in her voice. "I hope she's enjoying it."

“She is! She’s even joined a club and made a bunch of new friends. It’s nice to see her thriving,” Keiko replied, her smile warm and genuine. As they continued to chat about school and family, the weight of Sayuri’s troubles began to lift, even if just a little. For now, in this moment, it was just the two of them – two sisters sharing laughter.

CHAPTER 23

Sayuri pushed open the door to Ken Watanabe's office, the familiar scent of aged whisky filling the air. Ken sat behind his desk, an open bottle of Yamazaki 12-Year-Old whisky in front of him. He looked troubled, his brow furrowed, and a glass half-full in his hand.

"Is it a good time to talk?" Sayuri asked softly.

Ken glanced up, his expression softening. "You can sit down," he said, his words slightly slurred. "Always time for you." He gestured to a chair opposite him, pouring himself another generous glass of whisky. "Want some?"

"No, thank you," Sayuri replied politely, settling into the chair. She took a breath, steeling herself. "What happened with Takuya?"

"It has been dealt with," Ken said, his gaze drifting to the window. "I've given him a chance to prove his loyalty. Let's see what happens."

Sayuri watched him, searching for any hint of certainty in his eyes, but found only shadows of doubt and loneliness. The air felt thick with unspoken words, and she could sense the tension between them—a magnetic pull that had always lingered just beneath the surface.

Ken poured another large glass of whisky, his attention shifting back to her. He stared, making her feel self-conscious, her heart racing under his gaze. "You know, Sayuri, I still remember that night you were standing like a little lost girl outside CAVE. I think about that often."

Caught off guard, Sayuri looked down at her hands folded in her lap, not knowing how to respond.

"Sumimasen," Ken said, suddenly apologetic. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I think the whisky is making me talk too much."

"It's okay," Sayuri lied, forcing a smile. "I'm not uncomfortable."

Ken laughed, a slightly drunken sound. "You're lying. But anyway, thank you for coming to visit. You always make me feel better." His smile was warm, almost tender. Then he continued, "Sayuri-chan, I think you must leave your job at the casino. Things are about to get dangerous. I care too much about you to put you in danger."

"Hai! Oyabun!" she replied, bowing her head slightly, a mix of relief and concern washing over her.

They exchanged a moment of silence, the weight of unspoken feelings hanging in the air. Finally, Ken broke the stillness.

"I consider your father's debt paid off now. You have done well. Thank you."

Sayuri's heart soared at the news, her smile breaking through.

"Arigato gozaimasu, Oyabun!" she thanked him, bowing in gratitude.

Ken stood up from his plush office chair, a bit unsteadily, and moved around the desk. Sayuri's breath caught in her throat as he approached her. He stood behind her chair, placing his hands gently on her shoulders.

"I think you know how I feel about you, Sayuri-chan. You are special to me. I will miss you."

Her heart fluttered at his words; a rush of excitement mixed with a pang of sadness. The realization struck her—without the Yakuza to bind them, she wouldn't have any reason to see him. That thought made her heart ache, but she remained silent. After a moment, Ken returned to his chair, pouring yet another drink.

"Would you like some?" he asked again.

"No, thank you," she replied, her voice heavier. "Ken-San, it has been a pleasure working for you. Thank you for allowing me to work off my father's debt. I will go now."

Ken's expression shifted, a hint of reluctance in his eyes. "Sayuri-chan, I might need you again for a job—a paying job. Is there any way I can contact you?"

Surprise flickered through her, but she kept her composure. "Your guys know where I live. Remember? The debt collectors? Just write a letter, and I'll be sure to get it." She smiled, but it felt bittersweet.

Turning away, she walked toward the door, her heart heavy yet strangely lightened by their exchange. As she stepped into the hallway, she felt the import of the moment linger, knowing that this chapter of her life was closing, but the connection would always remain, no matter where the future led.

Sayuri sat on her bed, the silence of her empty room pressing down on her. With no job to occupy her time and school not starting until next year, she felt adrift. She went to the hallway and picked up the receiver and dialed Aya's house number, hoping to hear her best friend's voice.

"Hello, Mrs. Tanaka," she said when Aya's mother answered.

"Hello, Sayuri! How are you?"

"I'm okay. Is Aya around?"

"Oh, she's out for supper and a movie with her boyfriend, Maki," Mrs. Tanaka replied cheerfully.

Sayuri's heart sank, surprise coursing through her. A boyfriend? She hadn't known. "Oh, okay. Thank you, Mrs. Tanaka. I'll call again tomorrow."

After hanging up, Sayuri returned to her bedroom, frustration bubbling beneath the surface. She tried to focus on her studies, determined to keep the rhythm of learning alive until she could retake her high school exams. But the words blurred on the page as her mind spiralled into darker thoughts. Regret gnawed at her. Leaving school to pay off her father's debt had seemed noble at the time, but now it felt like a mistake. The more she thought about him, the angrier she became. He hadn't changed at all; he continued to spiral out of control, causing chaos in their lives.

As she lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling, resentment coiled tightly in her chest. *He's a cancer that must be excised*, she thought bitterly. A divorce would splinter the family further, but with Atsuko already gone and only Keiko left to worry about, Sayuri felt a flicker of determination. She could support herself now; her croupier skills were in demand, and she knew if ever she was stuck, she could always ask Ken to help her out with a job.

She decided that if she shared her thoughts with Keiko, maybe her sister would see that divorce was in their family's best interest. After all, she had to point out the truth: their father hadn't come home early or sober in the last three weeks since Sayuri had been back. It was a pattern that was impossible to ignore. She got up and went to knock on her sister's bedroom door. As she waited for a response, she noticed that Keiko had stuck the new Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles decal on her door.

"Keiko," Sayuri said, her voice impatient, "We need to..." just as Keiko opened the door. "...talk," she finished.

The smile on Keiko's face evaporated as she sensed the seriousness in her sister's tone. "About what?" she asked worriedly, beckoning Sayuri to come inside.

"About dad. He's not getting better. He hasn't come home early or sober in weeks. I think it's time we consider a divorce for mom."

Keiko's brow furrowed. "It's been like that for much longer, you know? You're right; it's not fair to mom."

Sayuri took a deep breath. "I'm planning to get evidence that he's cheating. I've been thinking about it. According to Japanese divorce law, if we have proof, the divorce can happen easily, and mom can claim financial compensation."

Keiko's eyes widened, a mix of shock and understanding swirling in them. "That makes sense. It's unfair that he's doing this to us and mom. He doesn't even take us out on weekends anymore like he used to."

"It's time to pick a side—mother... or father," Sayuri said, her voice firm.

Keiko hesitated for a moment, but then nodded, her expression resolute. "I choose mom. Dad's behaviour is unacceptable."

Sayuri felt a rush of relief. “Good. We have to stick together on this. If we can show Mom that we support her, maybe she’ll feel stronger about making a change.”

Keiko sighed, her resolve solidifying. “So, what’s the plan? How do we get proof?”

“I’ll start by following him. I know his routines, and I’ll see if I can catch him in the act,” Sayuri said, her voice steady with determination. “I’ll document everything. We need to be smart about this.”

“Atsuko has a camera!” Keiko reminded Sayuri eagerly. “I wonder if she took it with her to university? Let’s go look in her room.”

As the sisters plotted their course of action, a sense of purpose filled the room. For the first time in a while, Sayuri felt a flicker of hope. They were taking control of their situation, ready to confront the cancer that had plagued their family for too long. And together, they would find a way to heal.

Sayuri stood in front of her bedroom mirror, adjusting her new cap and big sunglasses. The loose jacket and jeans were a deliberate choice, designed to make her blend into the crowd. She had purchased a camera with the money she’d saved from her time at the casino—a small investment for a mission she had set for herself. She glanced at the clock; it was nearly time. Her father typically left the office around 7 PM, heading straight for a nearby bar where he often met his mistress. Determined, she grabbed her bag and headed out the door.

The evening air was cool as she made her way to the office district. She waited patiently across the street, her heart pounding in her chest. At exactly 7 PM, she spotted him stepping out of the building, adjusting his tie as he walked. Sayuri followed discreetly, keeping a safe distance as he made his way to the bar. Inside the dimly lit establishment, she found a corner table where she could observe without being noticed. After a few minutes, she watched as her father’s mistress arrived—a woman with long, dark hair and a confident stride. They greeted each other warmly, sharing a laugh that made Sayuri’s stomach churn.

For two hours, she watched them drink, their laughter and whispered conversations sharp contrasts to the anger simmering inside her. At 9 PM, her father and mistress both stood, and they left together – her father heading to the bus stop and his mistress walking away in the opposite direction.

He’s going home! Damn! she thought, disappointed.

Over the next few nights, this routine continued. She tracked them, documenting every detail with her camera, capturing moments that would serve as evidence. Each night, she felt a mix of anxiety and determination. It wasn’t just about proving his betrayal; it was about standing up for her mother and their family.

On the fourth night, she finally saw them take a different route. Instead of heading in separate directions, they walked together toward a nearby hotel. Adrenaline coursed

through her veins; tinged with a sense of dread. She ducked behind a pillar, watching as they entered the building. She watched as they booked into a room, making a mental note of which cubbyhole the receptionist retrieved the room key from. After waiting for them to get into the elevator, she approached the reception counter. She looked up at the empty cubbyhole where her father's room key had been just moments before and asked, "Excuse me, could I have the key for room 117, please?"

The receptionist looked up, slightly surprised but compliant. "Sure, let me get that for you." Sayuri paid cash, thanked the receptionist and entered a false name into the hotel register. She then made her way to the elevator and soon found herself in room 117, hoping the one next door was where her father and his mistress were having their liaison. It was a modest room that smelled faintly of cleaning products and cigarettes.

She quickly scanned the space for a vantage point. The thin walls were her only barrier to the truth. She moved to the window, peering through the drawn curtains into the adjacent room. The angle was wrong.

Why am I so short? she berated herself. Her first thought was to move a chair next to the window, but just the thought of hanging so far out of a window gave her vertigo and an involuntary shiver ran down her spine.

Not worth losing my life over, she decided. From her standing vantage point, she could only just see the top corner of the headboard. It wasn't good enough. She spent 15 minutes trying to come up with an alternative plan, but it was no use. There was no other way to get a good view of inside the bedroom.

Hang on! she thought, having a eureka moment. Looking across the street, she noticed another hotel of similar height. The Dogenzaka part of Shibuya was a popular entertainment district with a vibrant and bustling atmosphere, but there were hidden seedy corners that contrasted sharply with its trendy image. The hotel Sayuri now found herself in was in one such area, near the back streets of the district.

"One, two, three, four..." she said softly to herself as she counted the floors in the hotel opposite. *I should get a room one floor higher; it will give me a better angle for photos,* she calculated.

"Oh, well, that was a bit of a waste of money," she sighed as she left the room and closed the door behind her.

Back in the lobby once more, she decided to try her luck. Putting on her sweetest smile, she sashayed up to the young man at reception and asked, "Sumimasen, I just realised that I am in the wrong hotel. Is there any chance of a refund? I didn't touch anything."

"I'm sorry madam, I will have to deduct the first hour from what you paid. That is the best I can do."

"That will be fine," she said coolly, inwardly relieved that she wasn't losing *all* her money.

After receiving her partial refund, she left the hotel and crossed the road and entered the lobby of the hotel she had observed from room 117. The reception was a bit shabbier than the previous one. A man in a cheap suit and a bad haircut manned the reception desk, upon which stood a brass plaque inscribed with the name of the hotel.

Hotel Nadeshiko it read.

“Konbanwa!” greeted Sayuri as she approached the desk. “I wonder if you could do me a favour,” she asked sweetly, once again using her womanly charms to get her way.

“Certainly, madam. How may I help you?” he replied politely.

“I was wondering if I could see one of your rooms on the 4th floor, please? I’m looking for the perfect themed room for my boyfriend and I and my friend told me that your 4th floor rooms are the best in the area. Very romantic. I’d like to see for myself, if you don’t mind,” she purred.

“Of course, madam. I’ll get the bellboy to show you some rooms,” he replied, retrieving 3 keys from their hooks as he did.

“You are sooo kind,” Sayuri continued her act.

“This is nice,” Sayuri said aloud to the bellboy as they entered *The Romantic Escape Suite*, the third and last room she was shown. The other two had been equally nice, but on the wrong side of the hotel. *This is perfect*, she thought, strolling casually up to the window and gazing across at the hotel her father was using as a love nest and quickly counting the floors up to room 116.

Not wanting to arouse suspicion, she deliberately sat on the plush bed and bounced up and down. “This will do nicely,” she laughed, immediately bringing a red tinge to the uncomfortable bellboy’s cheeks. The room was designed to envelop couples in an atmosphere of intimacy and allure, with soft, dim lighting setting the mood. Heart-shaped furniture invited relaxation and romance, and the centrepiece - a king-sized bed draped in silky red and gold linens, was adorned with rose petals scattered across the sheets. The walls were adorned with tasteful artwork depicting serene landscapes and whimsical motifs, creating a calming yet romantic vibe.

The more Sayuri explored the room, the more genuine her appreciation became. A large mirror spanned one wall, and she could imagine the soft glow of candles placed strategically around the room reflecting in it. The en-suite bathroom boasted a deep soaking tub, complete with scented bath oils and fluffy towels, inviting guests to unwind together. With its enchanting decor and thoughtful amenities, the *Romantic Escape Suite* promised an unforgettable experience for couples looking to celebrate their love.

What a waste! I wish I was coming here with a boyfriend – and not alone like some peeping-tom, she mused, the smile slipping from her face.

“Thank you for showing me around,” she thanked the bellboy as he locked room number 121 and accompanied her back to reception.

“Did you see anything you like?” asked the bashful receptionist, eager to please.

“Hai! Room 121 is perfect for my needs,” she replied genuinely, giving him her best smile. “The problem is that I can’t book it right now as I don’t yet know when my boyfriend can make it to Shibuya,” she lied, noticing his sad eyes at the mention of the word ‘boyfriend’.

“That is fine, madam. I’ll try keep it free as much as possible. Do you know if it will be this week?” he queried.

“Probably,” she said earnestly, feeling a mixture of disappointment and excitement as she thought of her father’s betrayal and her mission to reveal it.

“Perfect! I look forward to seeing you soon, madam,” he smiled bashfully.

“Ok. See you!” she said as she turned to walk away.

“Have a good night, madam,” he said politely, watching her hypnotically as she left the building.

Sayuri had never wandered the streets of Shibuya alone at night this late before. Neon lights flickered above, casting an eerie glow on the narrow, winding alleys as she meandered through the unfamiliar streets. The air was thick with the sounds of laughter, distant music from *izakayas*, and the chatter of late-night revellers. She was enjoying the atmosphere – excitement mixed with a hint of danger.

She took a deep breath, inhaling the rich, savoury aroma of grilled *yakitori* mingled with the sweet scent of *takoyaki* sizzling on hot plates. *This is hungry work*, she thought, following the enticing fragrance of fresh ramen broth and entering a nearby *ramenya* to savour its culinary delights.

After savouring a delicious bowl of steaming ramen, Sayuri felt a warm glow of contentment as she walked the bustling streets of Shibuya. The colourful neon lights twinkled above her as she immersed herself in the electric energy of the night. The streets in this area were lined with cheap love hotels, each with bold, colourful signage advertising various themes and hourly rates.

Some hotels flaunted their kitschy facades, resembling whimsical castles or retro motels, while others are more discreet, with dimly lit entrances and minimalistic designs that blended into the surroundings. Some of the entrances were marked by large, garish posters featuring scantily clad models and provocative imagery, enticing couples looking for a quick escape from reality.

Scattered among the love hotels were some small bars and karaoke joints, where groups of friends spilled onto the streets, their laughter mingling with the sound of clinking glasses. It was if Sayuri was seeing the real Tokyo for the first time in her short, sheltered life. Yes, it felt a bit chaotic, but in a fun way.

Sayuri knew that despite the vibrant nightlife, there was a darker side of the district, a side hidden from the happy tourists that navigated the winding streets of Shibuya. In just a few short months, she had been made acutely aware of the unsavoury characters that could sometimes be found lurking in the shadows. This juxtaposition of allure and danger created an atmosphere that thrilled Sayuri - exciting yet cautionary, where the thrill of the night could quickly turn.

CHAPTER 24

A ray of sun streamed through the bedroom window, casting warm golden light on her desk as she tried to focus on the English Grammar textbook she was reading. It felt strange being at home on weekdays and she was feeling a bit like a ship without a rudder. With Keiko at school and Atsuko living in a university dorm, the house felt empty.

Her father, Takeshi, was rarely home—when he was, it was often late and under the influence. Sayuri sighed, glancing at her English textbooks spread across her desk. English had always been her favourite subject, and she had a knack for languages. The dream of traveling the world lingered in her mind, but today, with so much free time, she felt adrift. Her mind drifted too – and she once again thought about her mother, Yoko, who would soon be home from her temp job. It struck Sayuri that this was a good opportunity to talk about her dad and the growing tension in their family.

The sound of keys jingling snapped her out of her reverie. Her mother was home. Sayuri closed her textbooks and went to the kitchen, just in time to help her mom unpack the groceries she had bought for supper. Yoko greeted Sayuri with a tired smile.

"Hello, my dear. What have you been up to today?"

"Just studying," Sayuri replied, masking her unease. "Can I help you with dinner?"

"That would be nice," Yoko said, her smile faltering slightly. "We're making fried rice."

As Sayuri put on an apron and started chopping carrots, she noticed the weariness in her mother's eyes. Yoko busied herself with the rice cooker, but Sayuri could sense the weight of unspoken worries.

"How was your day, mom?" Sayuri asked, trying to break the silence.

"It was fine, thanks. My work is not exciting. Mainly just paperwork," Yoko replied, forcing a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

Sayuri's heart ached for her mother. She knew that the financial strain had eased since Takeshi's debts were settled, but the emotional toll of his nightly absences and broken promises weighed heavily on Yoko. She thought about the photos she had taken of her father with his mistress, evidence of a betrayal that cut deep.

"Are you OK, Mom? You look a bit down," Sayuri ventured.

Yoko's smile faltered again. "Things are OK. I'm just tired, Sayuri-chan," she admitted, trying to sound upbeat.

"Mom, I know you and Dad have been having a rough time lately. I get a bit down too. I feel sad when I see the tension between you and him."

"Honestly, Sayuri-chan, I feel very alone. I never see your father anymore. And he spends so much time drinking after work. It's exhausting. I wish I could find a way to fix our relationship, but I'm beginning to think that ship has sailed," Yoko confessed, adding peas and corn to the bowl of chopped carrots.

Sayuri took a deep breath, her heart racing. "Well, I don't really know how to say this, so I'm just going to tell you."

"What is it, Sayuri-chan?" Yoko asked, sensing the seriousness in her daughter's tone.

"I followed Dad and his mistress to a hotel in Shibuya. I've been doing surveillance on him," Sayuri confessed, her voice steady despite the gravity of her words.

"Whaaat?" Yoko exclaimed, shock flooding her features. "I thought he had at least given up the mistress. He promised me!"

"I'm sorry, Mom. I only found out a short while ago. It took me some time to get proof," Sayuri said, her heart pounding.

"Proof? What do you mean by proof?" Yoko asked, curiosity mixed with disbelief.

"I bought a camera with my casino money and managed to take some photos of them together. Just in case you decide to get divorced," Sayuri explained, her voice firm but gentle.

"You did what? You followed them and took photos? I don't believe it! How could you, Sayuri!" Yoko shouted, her voice rising in surprise.

"I'm sorry, Mom, but Keiko and I think it would be best if you divorced dad. He is destroying our family!" Sayuri raised her voice, frustration bubbling over.

"My own kids telling me how to live my life! You have no right to get involved, Sayuri!" Yoko shot back.

"Yes, I do!" Sayuri shouted, anger and passion fuelling her words. "Keiko and I hate seeing you being treated like this—like garbage! We are part of this family too! We decided to pick a side—and we both chose you!"

Yoko paused, her expression softening as she processed Sayuri's fierce defence. The kitchen grew quiet except for the sizzle of vegetables in the wok. After a pregnant pause, Yoko finally spoke, her voice softer.

"I guess you are right, my child. You and Keiko are not kids anymore. You should have a say in family matters. I'm sorry I shouted at you. Sumimasen!"

"I'm sorry too, Mom. Sumimasen!" Sayuri replied, her heart still beating too fast.

"Okay, Sayuri-chan, tell me what you think I should do," Yoko said, her tone now more tentative.

"Well, I did some research. If you have proof of infidelity, you can divorce your spouse without any hassles...AND... you can claim financial compensation from Dad," Sayuri said, her voice steady, ready to guide her mother through the storm ahead. Yoko looked at her daughter, a mix of pride and sadness in her eyes. The conversation had shifted, and for the first time in a long while, Sayuri felt a sense of direction, not just for herself, but for their family as well.

Sayuri stared out her bedroom window, the mid-morning sun casting a warm glow over the quiet street. The world outside buzzed with life, but inside, she felt a heavy silence. It had been weeks since she had last seen Aya, and the absence of their laughter felt like a void in her heart. With a deep breath, she decided to take a step—no, a walk—toward Aya's house. They lived less than a block away, but it felt like miles.

As she walked, the familiar sights of their neighbourhood washed over her—a bakery with the smell of fresh bread, a small park where children laughed and played. Each step reminded her of the countless memories she and Aya had shared. But today, the warmth of nostalgia was mingled with a prickling loneliness. When she reached Aya's front door, she hesitated for a moment, nerves fluttering in her stomach. After knocking, she shifted her weight from one foot to the other, biting her lip. The door swung open, revealing Aya, dressed in a casual yet stylish outfit, her hair cascading down her shoulders.

"Sayuri! I didn't expect to see you," Aya exclaimed, her smile brightening the doorway.

"Surprise!" Sayuri replied, forcing a grin. "I thought I'd drop by since we haven't hung out in so long."

"Oh, I wish you had called first," Aya said, stepping aside to let Sayuri in. "I'm actually getting ready to meet Maki in Shibuya."

Sayuri's heart sank. "Oh... I didn't realize."

"Yeah, we've been planning this for a while," Aya continued, her tone gentle but firm. "I'm really sorry, Sayuri. Maybe if you'd called, we could've arranged something together."

"I know, I'm sorry." Sayuri shuffled her feet, feeling the weight of her loneliness settle back in. "I was just thinking... maybe we could all hang out next weekend? The three of us?"

Aya hesitated for a moment, her brow furrowing slightly. "That could be fun. Maki was talking about maybe going to *Natsu Matsuri* in Shinjuku. I'll have to check with him."

"Right, of course," Sayuri said, forcing a smile. "I get it. I just—I miss our time together. It feels like everything has changed."

Aya's expression softened. "I miss it too. But it's important for me to spend time with Maki right now. I hope you understand."

"Yeah, I understand," Sayuri replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Hey," Aya said, stepping closer. "If Maki doesn't like the idea of you joining us in Shinjuku next weekend, why don't we plan for dinner next week? Just the two of us? I want to hear all about what you've been up to."

Sayuri nodded, grateful for the offer. "That sounds nice. I'd like that."

"Great! I'll phone your house tomorrow and let you know about joining us next weekend," Aya promised, her smile returning.

"Yes, please do," Sayuri said eagerly.

As Aya turned to finish getting ready, Sayuri stood in the doorway, watching her friend bustle about. A part of her felt happy for Aya—she deserved this happiness with Maki. But another part felt like she was fading into the background.

"Well, I hope you have a great date with Maki. I can't wait to hear all about it," Sayuri lied, putting on a brave face. "I should get back home. I promised my mom I would help her with lunch."

As she walked back home with a heavy heart, she replayed the conversation in her mind. The world felt a little emptier, but perhaps next week would bring something new. Maybe she could find a way to bridge the gap between her loneliness and the life she once shared with Aya.

CHAPTER 25

The doorbell chimed through the quiet house, breaking the stillness of the afternoon. Yoko, Sayuri's mother, opened the door to find Aya standing there, a bright smile on her face.

"Hello, Aya! It's so nice to see you," Yoko said warmly, stepping aside to let her in. "Sayuri is in her room. You can go right up."

"Thank you, Mrs. Ichikawa!" Aya replied, her energy infectious as she bounded up the stairs.

As she reached Sayuri's room, Aya knocked lightly on the door before entering. Sayuri was sitting on her bed, a book open but forgotten in her lap.

"Hey, stranger!" Aya greeted, plopping down beside her. "What have you been up to with all this free time?"

Sayuri sighed, running a hand through her hair. "Honestly? I'm so bored. Ever since I lost my job, I just feel... stuck."

Aya tilted her head, considering. "What if you got a new job? It could give you some money and keep you busy while you wait for high school next year."

Sayuri brightened at the suggestion. "You know what? That's a good idea! I could use the distraction and some extra cash."

"Exactly!" Aya grinned. "And speaking of things to do, I have great news. Maki said it's okay for you to join us at the *Natsu Matsuri* festival!"

Sayuri's eyes widened with excitement. "Really? That's awesome! I can't wait!" She threw her arms around Aya in a tight hug.

Pulling back, Aya smirked playfully. "I think it's time you found yourself a boyfriend to hug! You're getting too touchy-feely with me. Maybe I should help you find a guy—or a pet. A cat might be good since your parents won't let you have a dog."

Sayuri laughed, a lightness filling the room. "I would love to have a cat! They're so cute and cuddly. But I'd settle for a boyfriend if I could find one."

"Don't worry, we'll work on both!" Aya said, winking. "Just focus on having fun at the festival for now."

"Sounds like a plan!" Sayuri replied, feeling a spark of hope.

From downstairs, Yoko called out, "Aya, Sayuri! Tea and snacks are ready!"

"Perfect timing!" Aya said, standing up. "Let's go."

Soft rays of sun streamed through the kitchen window, illuminating the cozy space where Sayuri and Aya sat at the small wooden kitchen table. The aroma of freshly brewed green tea filled the air, mingling with the sweet scent of mochi and the savory notes of yakitori skewers that Yoko had prepared.

In front of them, a delicate porcelain teapot sat alongside two matching cups, steam rising gently from the surface. A vibrant assortment of snacks adorned the table: colorful rice balls wrapped in nori, glistening with sesame seeds, and a plate of sweet red bean paste-filled dorayaki, their fluffy pancake exterior invitingly soft.

“Your mom’s snacks are always the best!” Aya exclaimed, taking a bite of the mochi. “I could eat these all day.”

Sayuri smiled, pouring tea into their cups. “You know how she loves to treat us. It’s her way of making every day special.”

Aya’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “Speaking of special, have you thought about the Natsu Matsuri this weekend? I can’t wait to see the fireworks!”

“Me too! There’s something captivating about colourful explosions!” Sayuri replied, her voice bubbling with enthusiasm. “We should wear our yukatas. It’s a tradition!”

“Absolutely! I have that new floral one I want to show you,” Aya said, her cheeks flushing with joy. “And we have to try all the street food—yakitori, takoyaki, and those sweet shaved ice desserts!”

Sayuri giggled, “I’ll be the one carrying all the snacks, then! But it’ll be worth it to see the lanterns lighting up the night.”

“Right? And the music! It always gets me in the festival spirit,” Aya added, her eyes gleaming. “We’ll dance, eat, and make memories.”

“Yes! Let’s promise to make this the best festival yet.” Sayuri raised her teacup, a gesture of friendship.

Aya clinked her cup against Sayuri’s, sealing their vow with laughter. “To the *Natsu Matsuri* and a day full of joy!”

As they sipped their tea, the anticipation of the festival filled the kitchen, mingling with the warmth of the snacks and the love from Yoko’s careful preparations.

Aya turned to Sayuri. “I’m so to rush, my friend. Busy, busy! I’ll see you this weekend, okay? We’ll meet at my house Saturday morning.”

“Definitely! I’m looking forward to it!” Sayuri responded, her spirits lifted.

“Ichikawa-san, arigatō gozaimashita!” she thanked Yoko, bowing her head slightly as she did so. “I always feel spoiled by you,” she smiled.

“You’re always welcome, Aya. Glad you enjoyed it,” Yoko replied enthusiastically.

Aya waved goodbye as she headed for the door, leaving Sayuri feeling a sense of excitement for the days ahead.

The sound of the front door closing echoed through the house, snapping Sayuri out of her boredom. She perked up, recognizing that Keiko was home from school. Feeling a bored and lonely, she decided to visit her sister's room. Knocking softly on the door, she called out, “Keiko, can I come in?”

“Sure!” came Keiko's cheerful voice from inside.

Sayuri opened the door and stepped into the room, the familiar scent of Keiko’s favourite floral air freshener enveloping her. Keiko was busy unpacking her *rando*, the distinctive backpack used by students, and she glanced up with a bright smile.

“Hey, Sayuri! What’s up?” she asked, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

Sayuri settled onto Keiko’s bed, feeling comfortable in the cozy space surrounded by posters and school memorabilia. “I was just wondering how high school is going,” she said, leaning back on her hands.

“High school is great!” Keiko replied, her excitement palpable. “There are quite a few people in my class from middle school, but I’m also making new friends. There’s this one girl, Sakura, who plays tennis with me. She’s hilarious! We hang out at school quite a bit.”

“That’s nice to hear,” Sayuri said, a hint of nostalgia in her voice. “Aya and I used to be like that.”

Keiko paused, her expression shifting slightly. “How are you and Aya these days? I see her at school sometimes. I think she has a boyfriend now.”

“Yeah, she’s dating some guy named Maki. The three of us are going to the *Natsu Matsuri* festival in Shibuya on Saturday,” Sayuri replied, trying to hide her excitement.

“Saturday!” Keiko exclaimed; her eyes wide. “We’re having our school festival on Saturday! I was hoping you would come!” She put on a mock sad face, pouting slightly. “We haven’t done anything together for ages. Please come, little sister,” she pleaded.

“That’s strange. I wonder why Aya never mentioned the school festival. She usually loves to get involved with these things,” Sayuri mused, frowning slightly.

“She is involved! Aya organized the game booths for the festival. She’s been going around from class to class, asking students to get their parents to donate prizes for the booths,” Keiko explained, her tone earnest.

“Really?” Sayuri asked, raising an eyebrow in surprise.

“Yes, really! But I think she only has to be there for an hour early in the morning to set up, and then she’s free,” Keiko added, looking hopeful.

“Oh, okay. That makes sense. I’m supposed to meet her at home mid-morning,” Sayuri said, feeling a bit torn.

“So, will you come to the school festival then? At least for a little while?” Keiko prompted, her eyes wide and pleading.

Sayuri took a moment, weighing her options. “Alright, I’ll come for a bit,” she finally agreed, a smile breaking across her face.

“Yes! Thank you, Sayuri!” Keiko cheered, clapping her hands together. “It’ll be so much fun! You can meet my friends, too!”

Sayuri felt a warm flutter of anticipation. “I’m looking forward to it. It’ll be nice to see you in action at your festival.”

“Great! I’ll make sure to introduce you to everyone,” Keiko said, her excitement infectious.

As they chatted about the festival plans, Sayuri felt a renewed sense of connection with her sister, energized for the day ahead and the memories they would create together.

The Saturday morning sun shone brightly as Keiko and Sayuri made their way to the bustling school festival. Colourful banners fluttered in the breeze, and the air was filled with the enticing aromas of festival food.

Sayuri was dressed in a vibrant *yukata* adorned with cheerful floral patterns, capturing the essence of summer. The lightweight cotton garment flowed gracefully as she moved, cinched at the waist with a contrasting obi that added a pop of colour to her outfit. On her feet, she wore traditional geta, their wooden soles providing a satisfying clack with each step as she walked through the bustling festival grounds. Her hair was elegantly styled in a simple updo, accented with delicate hairpins shaped like cherry blossoms, while a touch of light lipstick and blush highlighted her youthful features. With a spirit of excitement and joy, Sayuri felt both comfortable and beautiful, ready to immerse herself in the festivities with her sister.

As they wandered through the various stalls, Sayuri spotted Tomoko across the courtyard, accompanied by her parents. A surge of confidence washed over her. Now that she was out of school and had Yakuza connections, she felt unafraid.

“Keiko, I’ll be right back,” Sayuri said, determination in her voice. She made her way toward Tomoko, who seemed to be trying to blend into the background.

“Hey, Tomoko!” Sayuri called out, her tone friendly. Tomoko turned, surprise flickering in her eyes. “And hello to your parents! What a wonderful daughter you have,” she added with a saccharine smile.

Tomoko's father raised an eyebrow, clearly taken aback. "Thank you! That's very kind of you. But I must ask, do you work in a casino?" he inquired, catching Sayuri off guard.

"Um, no," Sayuri stammered, puzzled. "Why do you ask?"

He explained, "My uncle owns a casino in Shibuya. We were at a family function a while back and Tomoko pointed out one of the croupiers that looked like you and mentioned that she used to be in her class," he said, turning to Tomoko for confirmation. Tomoko looked shell-shocked. Sayuri had never seen Tomoko so unsure of herself. "Hai!" was all Tomoko could muster as she stood there awkwardly.

"No, I don't work in a casino," Sayuri said, avoiding an outright lie.

Just then, young man with a noticeable neck tattoo, joined them, hotdog in hand. He nearly choked as he noticed Sayuri, his expression shifting from surprise to apprehension.

"Ahh! This is my nephew, Kazuki," Tomoko's father introduced him to Sayuri.

"Konichiwa!" Sayuri greeted, trying to maintain her composure while feeling the tension in the air. Tomoko had grown silent, her gaze darting nervously to her cousin.

Sayuri felt like a duck being chased by a swan - outwardly calm and composed, but beneath the surface, her legs were kicking furiously in panic. She decided it was best to excuse herself.

"Well, it was nice chatting with you all, but I should find my sister," she said, offering a polite smile.

As she walked away, her heart raced with a mix of emotions. She found Keiko near a booth filled with colourful prizes, her face lighting up when she spotted Sayuri.

"Hey! How did it go?" Keiko asked eagerly. "Did you finally tell her what you think of her?"

Sayuri leaned in closer, her voice low. "You won't believe what just happened. Tomoko was there with her parents, and her dad asked me if I work in a casino! He said Tomoko mentioned me at a family function at the casino. I think she might have set me up."

Keiko's eyes widened in surprise. "Really? That's strange. What do you think she's up to?"

"I don't know, but I want to find proof," Sayuri said, determination creeping into her voice. "Can you help me figure this out?"

"Of course!" Keiko replied, her expression serious. "Let's keep an eye on her. If she's plotting something, we'll find out."

"I have an idea," said Sayuri softly.

“What?” asked Keiko.

“We need to get close to Tomoko and listen to her conversations with her friends. She is not the sort of person to keep things to herself. She loves to gloat. If she did set me up, she would tell someone,” surmised Sayuri.

“You’re right!” said Keiko. “She loves to tell everyone how great she is, and we all know that you are her arch-nemesis, so for sure she would tell her friends,” agreed Keiko.

“Yes, and all of her gang are here today. Come with me Keiko, I have a plan,” Sayuri instructed.

CHAPTER 26

The neon lights of Shibuya flickered to life as night descended, casting a colourful glow over the bustling streets. Sayuri paced nervously outside the Yamaguchi-gumi casino, her mind spinning with urgency.

She had proof that Tomoko set her up, and she couldn't shake the feeling that Takuya's innocence hinged on getting this information to Ken. Saturdays often found him in the casino, greeting high rollers or having impromptu meetings in the VIP area. She glanced at her watch, realizing just how late it was.

Her mind raced back to her missed outing with Aya and Maki, but there was no time for regrets. The weight of the situation pushed her forward. She took a deep breath and stepped into the casino, the lively sounds of laughter and clinking glasses enveloping her.

Inside, the atmosphere was electric. Patrons crowded around gaming tables, while waitstaff weaved through the throngs with trays of drinks. Her eyes scanned the room, searching for a familiar face. Sayuri spotted Ryu, one of Ken's trusted associates, leaning against the bar, nursing a drink.

"Ryu!" she called out, making her way through the crowd. He looked up, surprise crossing his features as he noticed her.

"Sayuri! What are you doing here?" he asked, his expression shifting to concern as he noticed the urgency in her tone.

"I need to see Ken. It's important," she said, desperation creeping into her voice. "It's about Takuya! It's urgent!"

Ryu's eyes widened at her revelation. "About Takuya? What do you mean? Ken's not here right now; he's at a dinner meeting with some businessmen."

"Do you know where?" Sayuri pressed, determination in her eyes.

Ryu hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "He should be at Kizuna, one of our restaurants down the street. It's not far from here. You can catch him there. But I don't think you can go dressed as a Mutant Ninja Turtle!" he laughed, looking at Sayuri's costume.

"Thank you, Ryu! I can't explain everything now, but I need to get this information to him before it's too late," Sayuri said, her heart pounding.

"You'll need to change first. Hang on! Wait here – I'll be back in a few minutes," he instructed.

"OK," Sayuri agreed, as she watched Ryu disappear into the croupier change rooms.

“Here. Try these,” Ryu said upon his return a few minutes later, holding a small bag in one hand. “They’re my girlfriend’s clothes, but she will be dealing all night, so she said you can use them. She’s about your size, so they should fit,” he explained.

“Arigato gozaimasu!” thanked Sayuri, taking the bag from Ryu.

“You can use the croupier change room, but please bring them back tonight if you can. It’s not urgent though. If you can’t - then tomorrow will do,” Ryu said.

“Be careful, Sayuri. And whatever you do, don’t interrupt Ken at the dinner table! Get a waiter to call him,” Ryu cautioned, a serious look on his face.

“Hai!” she promised, her resolve strengthening. Without wasting another moment, she strode towards the change room and soon she was out of the casino and into the streets of Shibuya, her mind focused on one thing - getting to Ken before it was too late.

Sayuri arrived at Kizuna, the warm glow of the restaurant spilling out into the night. She pushed the door open, the sounds of clattering dishes and lively chatter greeting her. The restaurant was packed, but she quickly scanned the room for Ken.

After a few moments, she spotted him at a private booth in the back, engaged in conversation with a group of well-dressed businessmen. Just as she was about to approach the head waiter, she hesitated, feeling a sudden wave of nerves. Would he even take her seriously? Gathering her courage, she walked over to the waiter.

“Sumimasen! I am sorry to bother you! I have an urgent message for Mr. Ken Watanabe! Could you please tell him that I am here. I don’t want to interrupt his business dinner. Please!”

Not wanting to upset an acquaintance of a Yakuza boss, the waiter bowed slightly and asked, “Certainly madam. Who shall I say is delivering the message?”

“Ichikawa, Sayuri desu,” she answered politely and went to stand a bit further away from Ken’s table, not wanting to look like the little lost girl she felt she was. She struggled to remain calm as she watched the waiter bend down and whisper something into Ken’s ear. “Excuse me, sir. A girl named Sayuri is here and says she urgently needs to speak with you.”

Ken’s expression shifted from casual interest to immediate concern. “Send her over,” he instructed, his voice firm.

Moments later, Sayuri spotted the waiter gesturing for her, and her nerves tingled as she made her way through the crowded restaurant. The hum of conversation faded as she approached Ken’s table, where he was seated with several well-dressed businessmen.

“Ken-San,” she said breathlessly, her eyes locking onto his. “Thank you for seeing me.”

“Give me a moment,” Ken said to the group, then stood up and gestured for Sayuri to follow him to a quieter corner of the restaurant. The chatter of the dining room faded as they stepped away from the table.

“What’s going on?” Ken asked, concern etched on his face. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Sayuri took a moment to gather her thoughts, feeling the weight of his gaze. “I have proof that Tomoko set me up. The information I got from the guys at the casino is false! Takuya is innocent!” she said passionately.

Ken’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean? What did she say?”

Taking a deep breath, Sayuri recounted the events from earlier that day— Tomoko’s father’s question about her working there, and the implications of Tomoko’s actions. “I’m sure she manipulated the situation to hurt both Takuya and me!” she explained urgently.

Ken listened intently, his expression growing more serious with each detail.

“Are you saying that Tomoko might have set you up?”

“Hai!”

“Do you have any tangible proof? Something I can use?”

Sayuri nodded vigorously, reaching into her bag to pull out the evidence she had gathered, and handed Ken a few pages of almost illegible scribbles.

“What on earth is all this?” Ken frowned. “It looks like a dog’s breakfast!”

“Sumimasen! It was difficult to write dressed as a Turtle,” she started to explain, then realised that this was not the time or the place to give Ken a detailed explanation of how she and Keiko had dressed up as a Mutant Ninja Turtles to follow Tomoko and her friends around after her parents had left the festival. She had tasked Keiko with writing down the snippets of overheard conversations that she had heard, which highlighted Tomoko’s manipulations. She laid them out in front of him, her hands trembling slightly.

As Ken quickly scanned the wrinkled pieces of paper, the atmosphere around them shifted. He glanced back at the businessmen at the table, then returned his focus to Sayuri.

“This is serious,” he said, looking up from the papers. “If what you’re saying is true, we need to act quickly. Tomoko’s influence could complicate things further, especially if the Mitsui-kai Yakuza clan is involved.”

“Exactly,” Sayuri replied, feeling a surge of determination. “And this also clears Takuya’s name.”

Ken nodded, his mind racing. “I’ll try and find him later tonight. I hope I’m not too late.”

“What do mean by that?” Sayuri asked guiltily, feeling responsible for any trouble Takuya might be in.

As they continued to discuss their plan in low tones, Ken’s demeanour shifted from concern to focused determination. “You’ve done well by coming to me with this information. We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

“Thank you, Ken-San. I just want to make sure Takuya is safe. I feel so bad about what I said about him before,” she said earnestly.

“Ok. Leave it with me,” he assured her, his voice steady. “Come to my office on Monday – before lunch. OK?”

“Hai!” she responded enthusiastically, feeling confident that Ken would avert a tragedy.

In that moment, Sayuri knew she had taken the right step. The fight wasn’t over, but she was at least taking action, and she felt relief as she stepped back into the bustling streets of nighttime Shibuya.

Part 2

CHAPTER 27

Bangkok, Thailand

Summer, 2023

The warm Bangkok air felt heavy as Sayuri sat on the edge of their small bed, her fingers nervously tracing the hem of her shirt. The apartment was filled with the scent of leftover curry, a reminder of their last shared meal, but the atmosphere was thick with uncertainty. Ricky was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, his expression a mix of frustration and concern.

“Sayuri,” he began, his voice steady but laced with an undercurrent of anxiety, “I need to know if there’s a future for us. When I go back to the States, what happens to us?”

Sayuri looked down, her heart aching. She cared for him deeply, but the fear of emotional entanglement loomed large in her mind. “I care a lot for you, Ricky,” she said, choosing her words carefully. “But I can’t promise that we’ll still be together when you come back.”

His brow furrowed, and she could see the disappointment creeping into his eyes. “So, what? You’re just going to move on to the next guy?”

“It’s not like that,” she replied quickly, feeling defensive. “I just... I don’t like long-distance relationships. I think we should do one day at a time. We can message every day.”

Ricky sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I get that a long-distance relationship is less than perfect, but it’s hard for me to see us as anything less than what we are now. I love you, Sayuri.” His voice softened; the vulnerability clear. “I’m sorry I can’t go to Nong Pai with you. Jolene needs someone to watch her place, and I have to put my family duty first.”

The mention of his father’s illness sent a pang of sympathy through her. “I know, and I understand that you have to go,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “But I just can’t promise you anything.”

Ricky stepped closer, his eyes searching hers. “What if I asked you to wait for me? Just until I get back?”

She hesitated, the weight of his question hanging in the air. The impulse to flee, to storm out and escape her feelings, tugged at her. “I don’t know if I can do that,” she admitted, feeling the familiar tension coil in her chest. “I’ve never been good at waiting.”

He took a deep breath, the reality of the situation settling heavily between them. “I don’t want you to feel trapped, but I also want you to know that I’m here for you, no matter what. I just wish we could figure this out.”

Sayuri looked away, unable to look at the pain so evident in his eyes. She wanted to be the person who could commit, who could be there for him fully, but the scars of her past loomed large. “Maybe I need some time to think,” she murmured, feeling the familiar urge to retreat.

“Okay,” he said softly, stepping back to give her space. “Just... promise me we’ll keep talking. I don’t want to lose you.”

“I promise,” she replied, though uncertainty lingered in her words. As Ricky moved to pack a small bag for his trip home, Sayuri felt a mix of sadness and relief. She knew this was a turning point, a chance to break her cycle of impulsiveness and fear, but the path ahead felt daunting. In that moment, as they prepared for the separation, she realized that taking it one day at a time was the only way forward, even if it meant navigating the unknown.

Sayuri opened her LINE messaging app and typed out a quick message to Jolene. She felt a mix of excitement and anxiety as she crafted the note.

Hi Jolene! I hope you’re doing well. I wanted to ask if it would be okay for me to house sit your place alone while Ricky is in the US. I’d love to help out with Little One!

After hitting send, she leaned back against the wall, her mind swirling with thoughts. It had been a whirlwind since Ricky had to leave, and the idea of staying in Jolene’s house felt like a fresh start. Moments later, her phone buzzed with a reply.

Hi Sayuri! Yes, that would be perfect! I’m so relieved! Richard is only here for another week, and I need someone reliable to look after Little One. Ricky has told me wonderful things about you—he says you’re lovely and responsible. Plus, he mentioned you’re a bit of a clean freak, which is a bonus!

Sayuri smiled at the screen, feeling a warmth spread through her. It was nice to hear that Ricky had spoken so highly of her, although she was uncertain whether being called a ‘freak’ was a good thing or not.

Sayuri replied, *Thank you so much! I promise to take great care of Little One and keep your place spotless!*

I trust you completely. I’m so glad that you are able to help me out, from Jolene. When can you get to Nong Pai?

I will leave tonight on the overnight train, so I will be there in the morning.

Great! Richard will still be in the house when you arrive. He has the house keys. There is nothing to do except feed the cat. So, make yourself at home!

As she finished reading the message, Sayuri felt a sense of relief wash over her. This opportunity was more than just a distraction; it was a chance to carve out her own space, away from the emotional turmoil she had been navigating with Ricky. She put her phone down and took a deep breath, envisioning herself in Jolene's cozy home, caring for Little One and enjoying a change of scenery. It felt like a step toward independence, a way to assert herself in a life that had often felt dictated by others. With a renewed sense of purpose, she began to gather her things, thrilled about the new chapter ahead.

Sayuri settled into her seat on the train, the rhythmic sound of the wheels gliding over the tracks soothing her nerves. The landscape outside the window shifted from the urban sprawl of Bangkok to the lush greenery of rural Thailand. As she watched the scenery unfold, a sense of excitement bubbled within her at the prospect of her new adventure in Nong Pai.

Upon arriving at the station, she stepped out into the warm sun and took a deep breath of fresh air, savouring the scents of jasmine and damp earth. She hopped onto the back of one of the many tuk-tuks that swarmed like bees outside the train station whenever a train was due.

Nong Pai is a small town and soon she found herself at Cat Mee B & B, which was nestled just beside Jolene's house, overlooking the mighty Mekong River. The entrance to the B & B welcomed her with vibrant flowers and a beautifully landscaped garden, a serene oasis that felt like a world away from her past life. After checking in to room 102—a cozy single room adorned with local artwork—she set her bag down and took a moment to appreciate her surroundings.

I think I will wait a couple of days before I meet Richard, Sayuri decided as she lay on her bed, Apple Mac Pro on her stomach. She had felt a sense of freedom as she had wandered the streets of Nong Pai the previous day. She had visited local shops, sampled street food, and took a long walk along the river promenade and then worked on her web design projects in the afternoon. The solitude was refreshing, a welcome change from her busy life back in Japan. She savoured each moment, knowing that once she met Richard, her time alone would be limited—at least for the week he was scheduled to stay.

Her new life as a digital nomad suited her, allowing her the opportunity to work and travel - a longtime dream of hers. The soft hum of her laptop filling the room as she focused on designing a new website. It was not her preferred job, but she had been left with limited options when Japan had experienced a long COVID lockdown, which had forced an indefinite closure of the massage parlour she worked at in Minamiboso.

Just as she was getting into a creative flow, a soft knock echoed through the space.

Who could that be? she thought, glancing at the clock. It was just after 10 AM. She hadn't shared her arrival with Richard, as she didn't have his contact details yet.

“Ok, I come now,” she called, her voice soft and gentle, almost hypnotic. Nervous anticipation fluttered in her stomach, but she relaxed a little when she heard a voice call out, “Hey, it’s Richard. Jolene’s friend.”

Sayuri pushed her laptop aside and stood up, adjusting the bun in her hair nervously. Gathering her thoughts, she approached the door and opened it, revealing Richard standing there, a mixture of excitement and warmth in his eyes.

“Hello, Sayuri,” he said, his voice low and inviting. “Jolene told me you had arrived.”

Her breath caught in her throat. *Wow! He’s tall*, she thought, as she looked up at the smart man dressed in Bermuda shorts and a pale blue short-sleeve button-up shirt, his grey-blue eyes kind and soulful. She looked at him silently, as he stood in the doorway, speechless, as if struck by lightning.

“Hell-oooo!” Sayuri replied, stretching the greeting into two distinct syllables, her thick Japanese accent making it sound playful.

Richard smiled involuntarily at her warmth, sensing an immediate connection. Sayuri noticed the effect she had on him; she was used to this kind of reaction from men. With her hair pulled into a small bun, exposing her elegant, gazelle-like neck, and dressed in a snugly fitting retro summer dress, she looked effortlessly chic—very much the picture of modern Japanese style. Tiny black house slippers completed her look, enhancing her petite frame. Standing before this lion of a man, she felt powerful, as if she had tamed him with just a word and a look.

Richard broke the spell, his voice steady yet inviting. “The house is just up the path. Would you like to come for a quick cup of coffee? Then I can give you a tour of the house.”

The magic word. Coffee. “Okayyy,” she purred, her tone reminiscent of a sultry anime character.

“Ok. It’s not far. Just follow me,” he said, leading her down the scenic garden path. Above them, two ginger squirrels chased each other along parallel strands of wire—one upside down, the other upright. Sayuri wondered if they were a mating couple or just two bachelors having fun.

I’m following him up the garden path, she thought, a smile playing on her lips as they reached the end of the path. They slipped through the open driveway gate and onto the verandah, where they removed their shoes in perfect synchrony, exchanging knowing glances that hinted at a budding connection.

“Welcome,” Richard said, sliding open the front door and ushering Sayuri inside.

The living room greeted her with a bright, inviting charm. White tiled floors reflected the natural light streaming through the expansive floor-to-ceiling windows. Vibrant tapestries and eclectic artwork adorned the walls, showcasing a kaleidoscope of colours that created a bohemian atmosphere.

A large, comfortable sectional sofa was strewn with an assortment of colourful throw pillows and soft blankets, inviting relaxation and casual gatherings. In the centre, a low wooden coffee table covered with a tie-dye cheesecloth tablecloth added to the whimsical decor. A few well-placed rugs in earthy tones provided warmth and texture, contrasting beautifully with the sleek white tiles. A dreamcatcher hung from the ceiling, completing the room's free-spirited charm. Sayuri noted that while the room had a cozy feel, it wasn't as clean as she preferred, making a mental note to spring clean later.

"Please sit down," Richard offered, gesturing to the sofa. "How do you take your coffee?"

"No sugar. No mil-ik," she replied, adopting her most adorable *kawaii* voice.

While she settled gracefully onto the slightly lumpy sofa, Richard disappeared into the kitchen. Five minutes later, he returned, placing two chipped coffee cups on the table in front of her. He set his own mug next to the ashtray and took a seat opposite her.

The sight of him on the cheap Thai sofa made Sayuri smirk; the big sleeper couch that she now sat on looked like the only one that could bear his weight. She felt small and delicate, half the size of this beast of a man.

As they sipped their coffee, the initial awkwardness began to fade, replaced by a comfortable silence filled with the sounds of the garden outside. Sayuri glanced at Richard, wondering what stories lay behind those soulful eyes. She felt a flutter of anticipation, a sense that this was the start of something new.

Sayuri watched as Richard tapped a cigarette out of his packet of L&Ms, the soft sound breaking the comfortable silence. He lit it, taking a moment to gather his thoughts, the smoke curling lazily into the air. Suddenly, he looked up, his expression earnest. "What is your name?"

"Sayuri," she replied softly, her voice like a gentle breeze.

Richard struggled to maintain a poker face, but it was clear he was failing miserably, utterly captivated by her presence. She felt a thrill at his reaction; her naughty, yet intelligent eyes locked onto his, knowing the game had officially begun.

"Jolene tells me that you will be staying at the B&B until I leave. Is that correct?" he asked, trying to regain some semblance of control.

"Can I stay here?" she shot back, smiling knowingly, aware of the barrage of thoughts exploding in his mind.

"Yes, of course," Richard said, after a slight pause. "But there's only one bed," he added matter-of-factly, a glint of mischief in his eyes, clearly not wanting her to stay at Cat Mee, but raising the stakes of their little game.

"That's OK. I have a yoga mat. I often sleep on the floor. It is good for my back," Sayuri replied, her calm demeanour belying the thrill of the challenge.

“You can sleep in the main bedroom. I’ll sleep in the other room,” he suggested, an almost boyish charm in his voice.

“Okay, thank you,” she purred, the words rolling off her tongue like honey.

Their eyes locked, and the playful tension in the room thickened. They were now fully engaged in a game of wits, testing each other, probing boundaries. Richard, seemingly unable to contain himself, removed his shirt, revealing a well-built torso.

So predictable, Sayuri thought, a sly smile creeping into her mind. *Men are easy*. She kept her expression neutral, fully aware of the effect her presence had on him.

She was accustomed to the attention, sometimes receiving multiple advances in a single day. Her survival instincts had sharpened over the years, making her adept at navigating these flirtations. Richard’s weak attempt at foreplay was amusing, but then he upped the ante again.

“By the way, I sleep naked, and I usually get up at night to go to the bathroom,” he said, his tone casual but the implication clear.

“That’s OK,” she replied, unruffled. “I’ve seen naked men before.”

It was the sort of response she knew would stoke his interest, and she could see the flicker of surprise and intrigue in his eyes.

“Are you still with Ricky, or have you broken up?” he asked boldly, his curiosity unfiltered.

“We broke up,” she replied, her tone light but with an undercurrent of finality.

Richard’s eyes brightened. “I’m looking for a wife,” he suddenly blurted out, a goofy grin plastered across his face. The moment the words left his mouth, a hint of crimson coloured his cheeks, embarrassment creeping in.

“At least he has balls,” Sayuri acknowledged inwardly, though her face remained impassive. She decided to ignore the foolish comment completely, a smirk forming in her mind as she contemplated the power dynamics in play. She had him—hook, line, and sinker.

“Leally?” she asked, tilting her head slightly, feigning innocence, pronouncing the ‘r’ as an ‘l’ – as most East Asians do.

Richard scratched the back of his neck, clearly flustered but unable to backtrack. “I mean, you know, not immediately or anything...”

Sayuri leaned in closer, a teasing glint in her eyes. “Maybe you should take your time, then. You wouldn’t want to rush into anything, would you?”

He opened his mouth to respond, but the words seemed to falter as he met her gaze. The atmosphere crackled with unspoken possibilities, and Sayuri revelled in the thrill of the moment, knowing she was the one steering the ship.

“Well, why don’t you go back to the B&B and check out? No rush. I’ll be here. Take your time. You know where the house is now,” Richard suggested, eager to steer the conversation away from his earlier blunder.

Sayuri placed her now empty coffee cup on the table, got up, and smiled. “OK. See you.”

Thirty minutes later, Sayuri approached the house with her luggage—one carry-on suitcase on wheels and a canvas backpack slung over her shoulder. She noticed that Richard had cleaned the verandah, mentally awarding him bonus points for his efforts. As a clean person herself, she appreciated the tidiness. The sliding door was open, so she slipped off her shoes and entered, placing her luggage in the lounge. Just then, Richard emerged from the main bedroom, arms full of dirty bedding, wearing tatty old rugby shorts. He looked startled at her sudden appearance, clearly not having heard her arrive.

“Oh! You’re back already!” he exclaimed. “I thought it would take more time for you to pack, but I see that you travel light.”

“Light?” Sayuri asked, tilting her head, not entirely sure of the context. Her English was good, but nuances sometimes eluded her.

Richard paused, trying to simplify his words. “Travel light means you carry not much luggage. Does that make sense?”

“Hai! I mean, yes,” Sayuri replied, a smile breaking across her face.

“Most women I know travel with many bags,” he said, giving her a backhanded compliment. “Do you travel a lot?”

“Yes. I like to travel,” she answered, feeling a flicker of pride.

“Please sit,” Richard suggested, motioning to the sofa with one hand. She sat down, enjoying the support of the plush cushions against her back. Travel aggravated her ongoing back problems.

“It’s getting close to lunchtime. Jolene has a scooter that I use to get around town. It’s small, but so are you. I was thinking I could show you around. Have you been to Nong Pai before?” Richard asked, his enthusiasm evident.

“Yes, but only to the Friendship Bridge. I sometimes go to Laos when I travel,” Sayuri replied, recalling her adventures.

“I see. So, you don’t know the town?” Richard pressed.

“No,” she confirmed.

“Ok. It’s not very big—only two main roads. I must show you where to pay for the internet and where the fruit and vegetable markets are. Is that OK?” he asked, his eyes bright with excitement.

“Yes,” Sayuri said, feeling intrigued.

“Can you ride a scooter? You can use the scooter while you’re here,” Richard offered, leaning forward slightly.

“Yes, I can ride a scooter,” she replied confidently.

“Good! You don’t really need a scooter. The town is small. But I like to use it. It gets too hot walking around, especially this time of year.”

“I will use it sometimes, but I like to walk,” Sayuri explained, her determination evident.

“Well, it’s up to you. Would you like more coffee before we go, or are you ready?” Richard asked, his tone casual.

“I am ready,” she smiled, feeling a surge of anticipation.

“Ok. Just let me have a quick shower. I’ll be ready in five minutes,” Richard said, standing up.

“OK,” Sayuri replied, watching his big, sweaty frame disappear into the bedroom. *He’s also pigeon-toed like me*, she thought, a small smile surfacing.

Five minutes later, Richard returned to the lounge, and Sayuri gave him an approving look when she noticed he was back in the blue button-up shirt and khaki sailing shorts he had worn earlier. He looked relaxed and ready for the day. They stepped out onto the verandah, and Richard slid the aluminium front door closed.

“You not lock door?” she asked, a hint of concern in her voice.

“I never lock the door. I trust the Thais. I’ve never had anything stolen in the four years I’ve lived in Thailand.” He paused, realizing that all her worldly possessions were also inside. “I don’t usually lock the door, but I will. I don’t want your things stolen.”

Sayuri smiled, appreciating his thoughtfulness. “Thank you. I feel better if it’s locked.”

Richard nodded and locked the door, then gestured for her to follow him down the path. As they stepped out into the bright sunlight, Sayuri felt a thrill of excitement. The day ahead promised new experiences, and she was eager to see what Nong Pai had to offer.

Richard guided Sayuri through the tiny town of Nong Pai, the sun beating down as they travelled along the one proper main road. He pointed out various sights and then

stopped at a shabby local market on the far side of town. They dismounted and Richard led her up the steps to the rows of stalls. They passed a few scruffy stalls filled with an eclectic assortment of goods—mostly food stalls, but also some selling flowers, clothing, and toiletries.

As they walked through the market, Sayuri wrinkled her nose at the overpowering smell wafting from the meat sections. Serious-looking women wielded large cleavers, chopping pig carcasses with a vigour that made her stomach turn. The mingling aromas of fish, pork, and chicken were hard to stomach, and she felt a wave of nausea wash over her as swarms of flies buzzed around the stalls.

Japanese markets are at least hygienic, she thought, her distaste evident. She wouldn't even shop at a place like this, preferring the cleanliness of big chain supermarkets where not a fly dared to land. While she loved Thailand for its vibrant culture and friendly people, her germaphobia made it difficult to appreciate the local markets.

Technically, Japan was part of Asia, but she couldn't help but feel that Thai culture was less refined than her own. The noble traditions of Japan had developed over centuries, largely insulated from external influences, and she considered them more civilized.

As they continued to navigate the one-horse town, Sayuri grew hot and impatient. The heat was stifling, and while she was inwardly pleased with the number of internet cafés she noticed, nothing else seemed to capture her interest.

"Are you hungry?" Richard asked, seeming to notice that she was wilting in the noon day heat.

"Yes, I only had coffee this morning," she answered, relieved that the town tour was ending.

"There are some restaurants next to the river. Shall we go there for lunch?" suggested Richard.

"OK," Sayuri replied eagerly.

They rode towards the river promenade, the designated bike lane guiding them past a row of restaurants with splendid views of the Mekong River. Richard twisted his head to ensure Sayuri could hear him. "If you see one that you like, just tell me."

"OK."

Not far along, they approached a popular Vietnamese restaurant. As they drew alongside, Sayuri's eyes lit up. "I like Vietnamese food."

Richard parked the bike near the entrance, dismounting with a flourish. "Is the food good here?" Sayuri asked, looking up at him.

"I don't know—I never eat out. I like to cook," he answered truthfully, a hint of pride in his voice.

The restaurant was impressive, boasting a long, covered verandah that extended about fifty meters along the promenade. The side facing the river was open, offering diners a magnificent view of the flowing water and the landscape beyond.

As they stepped onto the verandah, a cheerful hostess greeted them with a warm “*Sawasdee ka.*” She then asked in Thai, “*Khun xyak ca nang thihin?*”

Richard smiled, realizing the misunderstanding. “She’s not Thai,” he said, his tone light, aware that the hostess likely assumed he was an older man with a Thai girlfriend or bar girl.

Sayuri chuckled softly, the situation amusing her. Richard turned to her, his expression inviting. “Shall we find a table by the river?”

“Yes, let’s,” she replied, her spirits lifting at the prospect of a meal in such a beautiful setting. They followed the hostess towards a group of empty tables near the edge of the verandah, the gentle breeze off the river providing a welcome relief from the heat.

The hostess immediately broke into English. “Where would you like to sit?”

“You choose,” Richard said, turning to Sayuri.

She scanned the space and selected a table next to the long bamboo railing that separated the restaurant from the promenade – the wide river a mere 5 metres away. As they settled in, Sayuri felt a sense of ease wash over her, excited to experience a taste of local cuisine in a picturesque location.

The waitress quickly placed menus in front of them. Sayuri opened one and felt a wave of relief wash over her at the sight of picture menus, each professional photo labelled in Thai, English, and what she presumed was Vietnamese. Richard ordered a plate of spring rolls, and Sayuri chose a meat dish that looked deliciously spicy.

“Do you want to share the food? You can have half my spring rolls, and I’ll just have a taste of your meat dish. OK?” Richard suggested.

“OK,” Sayuri agreed, feeling a warmth spread through her at the prospect of sharing.

“Do you want something to drink?” Richard asked, a hint of eagerness in his voice.

“Yes, beer please,” Sayuri replied enthusiastically.

“Which beer?” he inquired, raising an eyebrow.

“Chang,” she said with a smile, half-expecting him to judge her choice.

“Chang? I drink that too. It’s the best beer in Thailand,” he responded, and Sayuri’s heart leapt. If he genuinely enjoyed Chang and wasn’t just being polite, it was

another thing they had in common. Even if he was being courteous, she appreciated the gesture.

“*Song Chang kwart yai*,” Richard ordered from the hovering waitress.

The beer and food arrived promptly, the waitress expertly balancing the plates. As was customary in Thailand, their table was given a drinks trolley with a bucket of ice. To combat the heat, most patrons added ice to their drinks.

“I don’t normally put ice in my beer, but it’s quite hot today, so I will,” Richard explained.

“I agree,” Sayuri said, raising an eyebrow, mentally ticking off another shared preference. “Why put water in beer?”

“*Kanpai!*” she toasted, raising her full glass in the air before chugging it down. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, noticing Richard watching her with wide eyes. “What?” she asked, feigning innocence but well aware that he was impressed by her beer-drinking prowess.

“You look thirsty,” he said, a grin spreading across his face.

“I am,” she replied, feeling a swell of pride. “Have you ever been to Vietnam?” she purred, pouring more beer into her ice-filled glass.

“No, never. But it’s on my list. And you?” Richard answered, genuinely curious.

“Yes, I have been a couple of times. I like Vietnam, especially the food,” she said, her eyes sparkling.

“These spring rolls are delicious. Did you eat many in Vietnam?” Richard asked, taking a sip of his own beer.

“I never saw any spring rolls in Vietnam. I ate noodles and street food,” Sayuri replied, her tone light.

“OK,” Richard said, trying his best to keep pace with her enthusiastic drinking. “More beer?” he offered, already anticipating her response.

“Sure,” she smiled, revelling in the attention, fully aware that the beer was part of Richard’s plan to loosen her up.

Sayuri could feel the dynamic shifting; she had captivated Richard completely. She relished the control she had over him, knowing that if she told him to jump in the river, he probably would. This was just another day for her—she was cute, sexy, and entirely aware of the power she wielded over men.

Two more *Changs* arrived just as Richard stuffed the last spring roll into his mouth. The food was finished, and the waitress cleared the table, disappearing through a doorway, leaving them alone to enjoy their drinks.

“How was the food?” Richard asked, leaning back, a satisfied look on his face.

“Not the same as I remember from Vietnam,” Sayuri replied, her expression thoughtful.

“Well, you ate all your food, so I guess it wasn’t too bad,” he stated, a teasing lilt in his voice.

“It was OK. I was hungry,” Sayuri confessed, shrugging lightly as if to downplay her earlier disappointment.

Richard chuckled, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “So, if you could choose anywhere to eat, where would it be?”

Sayuri leaned in, her tone playful. “Somewhere that serves sushi, and not just any sushi—fresh, beautiful sushi.”

Richard raised an eyebrow. “I take it you like sushi?”

“Yes. It’s the only time I eat fish,” she declared, her passion evident. “I love salmon and soy sauce.”

“Me too. Well...I eat raw tuna as well – with lots of wasabi,” said Richard, making a mental note to order sushi takeaway that week.

“Wasabi is too hot for me. I sometimes mix a little bit with soy sauce, but not often,” Sayuri continued.

“I need to take a trip to Japan,” he replied, half-serious, half-joking.

Sayuri smiled, enjoying the banter. “You’d love it. The spring rolls are better there.”

“OK,” he laughed, taking another sip of his beer.

The conversation flowed easily, each shared laugh drawing them closer. As the bright sun reflected harshly off the mighty river, Sayuri couldn’t help but feel that this day was turning out better than she had anticipated.

Sayuri could feel herself getting a bit tipsy as she finished her second big bottle of Chang beer. Richard, while not traditionally handsome, had a rugged charm that intrigued her. His nose was too big for his face, and his chin was prominent, but his grey-blue eyes were captivating, half-hidden by lazy eyelids that gave him a lost Labrador look. She noticed he never smiled with an open mouth, preferring a smirk, likely self-conscious about his smaller mouth. Yet, his almost perfect physique was undeniably a big turn-on for her.

It had only been after moving into Ken's "love nest" that Sayuri had started drinking, quickly realizing that alcohol heightened her passion. As she sat across from Richard, she felt a flutter of attraction which was heightened by the buzz of the beer. Noticing her empty glass, Richard leaned in slightly. “Would you like another one?”

Sayuri hesitated for a moment, weighing her options. They had only known each other a couple of hours, and she didn't want to make a bad impression—yet!

“No more beer for me, thank you,” she replied, her voice steady.

Richard shrugged and downed his almost full glass in one go. “*Check bin khaap!*” he called out to the hostess, who hurried over with the bill. Sayuri studied his face as he took out his wallet to pay, noticing that he looked a bit concerned. Sheepishly he asked Sayuri, “Do you have 200 baht on you?”

“Yes, of course,” she said, digging into her purse. She quickly found two 100-baht notes and handed them to him. Richard seemed relieved that she didn't look upset; on the contrary, she wore a happy, relaxed smile.

“Shall we go?” Richard asked, placing the money into the billfold.

“Sure,” Sayuri agreed, a mischievous glint in her eyes as she stood up, adjusting her bag on her shoulder.

They stepped back onto the promenade, the heat of the day still palpable, but a light breeze offered some relief. Richard glanced at her, curiosity sparking in his eyes.

“Ok. Hop on,” he instructed as he finished manoeuvring the scooter to point in the direction of Jolene's house.

While Richard was unlocking the door, Sayuri took her sandals off and placed them neatly on the verandah. As he stepped inside, he called out, “I'm just going to check that the bedroom is ready for you to move in,” and walked directly to the bedroom.

Sayuri rummaged through her backpack for her toothbrush, her heart fluttering with anticipation. A moment later, Richard reappeared, moving towards her with an easy confidence. She looked up and smiled knowingly, feeling a spark of connection between them.

Taking her tiny hand in his, he led her into the bedroom. Their steps were synchronized, like a gander leading a chick, and there was no resistance on her part. The air was charged with a mix of excitement and anticipation. The bedroom was cozy, tree-filtered sunlight casting a warm glow over the simple yet inviting decor. Richard stopped at the foot of the bed, turning to face Sayuri. He stood tall, his presence commanding, and for a moment, she felt as if the world outside had faded away.

Stopping at the foot of the bed, Richard turned and looked down at her, his towering presence commanding, with a visceral intensity that drew her in. The lines of his face were etched deep, each wrinkle telling a story of struggle and triumph. His eyes, piercing and full of raw emotion, seemed to reflect a lifetime of experiences that resonated with anyone fortunate enough to meet his gaze. There was a palpable energy about him, as if his very being was a tapestry woven from passion and pain, making every word he spoke feel like a cosmic connection to the world around him.

Sayuri wore a chic little two-tone yellow and brown 60s throwback dress. It was simple, yet elegant – finished with a delicate ribbon of lace around the lining of the short-sleeve cuffs. In one swift motion, Richard bent over and grabbed the hem of her dress with both hands and started to lift it up over her head, like a kid unwrapping an ice-cream. In his haste to disrobe her, he had failed to notice the zipper that ran down the back of her skimpy dress. It got stuck halfway – just far enough that she was now blinded by her skirt, which was too snug fitting to get past her bosom.

For an instant, Richard looked puzzled, then quickly realized the error of his ways, embarrassment flooding his face. He giggled involuntarily at his faux pas, triggering a similar giggle from Sayuri. She had always believed that laughter was the best ice breaker and the best way to deal with slip-ups in the bedroom.

Sayuri was impressed, however, by his quick recovery, as he smoothly lowered the dress back down, reached around to undo the zipper and watched her longingly as gravity did the rest.

Clad only in matching black silk underwear, Sayuri tingled with anticipation as she waited for his next move. He stooped swiftly and picked her up like a newlywed and laid her gently on the bed, but remained standing, fumbling with his belt buckle. The first word that came to her mind was, ‘cute’. He was clumsy beast of a man, but she already knew that beneath his rough exterior lay a little lost boy, eager to please. Finally managing to release his belt buckle, his khaki shorts dropped from his waist like a stone, leaving him as naked as the day he was born.

“Interesting,” mused Sayuri, noticing his lack of underwear and his tumescent pecker, which was pointing expectantly at her face, as she lay on the bed in anticipation. The comedy show continued as he knelt down on the bed next to her, generating a loud cracking sound.

Sayuri tried not to laugh as Richard quickly explained, “Jolene’s bed is made of cheap pine. It is not strong enough for big people. Don’t worry, it will be fine for you. You are tiny.”

Sayuri didn’t have time to respond as he straddled her legs and gently took her hands in his, pulling her torso upright so that she sat up in bed.

He’s out of practice, she thought to herself as he failed on his first attempt to undo her bra clasp, but he was successful on only the second attempt, which surprised her.

He’s quite gentle for such a strong man, she thought as he lowered her gently back down on the mattress, smiling as he admired her dainty chocolate drop nipples positioned precisely on her small beef bun shaped breasts. He planted a quick kiss on her luscious lips, which were equally plump on top and bottom and expertly slid his hands down her sides, hooking her lacy panties with his fingertips as he continued to her toes, flinging the tiny garment on the floor with flair. A surprising electrifying tingle shot through her petite naked body as he placed his mouth over one of her big toes and gently sucked it.

“That’s a first,” she thought as she lay there tingling in places she never knew she had. It was very sensual, although a part of her brain was disgusted that someone would suck on a foot. He moved on to the other big toe, then slowly kissed the insides of her legs until he reached the top. Sayuri was expecting him to go down on her, but he surprised her by bypassing her most erogenous zone and continued planting soft kisses across her abdomen until he reached her twin peaks.

CHAPTER 28

Sayuri had shared a bed with Richard that first night, and as she lay spooning behind him, she couldn't help but reflect on how different this felt compared to her past relationships. Richard was a few years older, and so far, he had treated her with respect. She couldn't recall the last time a man had paid so much attention to her. He seemed kind, considerate, and protective.

He was also a skillful lover. Ricky had been good in that regard too, but he had exhausted her with his drama—always making a big deal about everything. Sayuri figured it was an American thing. Richard, being the first South African she had been with, felt calm and laidback in comparison. *The honeymoon phase is always exciting*, she reminded herself, cautious not to make too many judgments on day one of their relationship.

Richard was fast asleep, snoring gently as she lay curled against his back, one arm resting on his muscular chest. It had been an interesting day, filled with new experiences and sights. Her first impression of life in Nong Pai was a positive one. Here she was in a spacious house in one of the better parts of town, right next to the Mekong River, and with a cute cat to keep her company once Richard departed for the Philippines. She especially loved the big kitchen. She couldn't recall knowing anyone in Japan who had such a generous space for cooking.

As she lay there, her mind too active to allow sleep, she contemplated all the possibilities this new chapter in her life held. Change was always scary, but it was tempered by the thrill of a new adventure – a new chapter in her life. She felt a rivulet of sweat trickle down her thigh, tickling her and breaking her train of thought. May was a brutal month in this part of Thailand, with temperatures soaring well into the 30s and above. Releasing her hold on Richard's chest, she shifted slightly backward, allowing the three bedside fans to blow more directly on her. *That's better*, she thought, relishing the wave of cool air rushing over her pale skin.

Sayuri was surprised that Richard could sleep so soundly in the stifling heat. Although she had grown up without aircon in Japan, the temperatures were seldom high enough to warrant A/C. Sleep didn't come easily to her at the best of times—even when she had been drinking, but Jolene's house was ridiculously hot, making it even more difficult to settle down to sleep. There was a small A/C unit in the main bedroom, but it was far from adequate for the huge room.

As she stared at the ceiling, her mind wandered. What would her life look like in a few months? The question twirled in her thoughts, mingling with the remnants of her earlier excitement.

She glanced over at Richard, his face relaxed in sleep, the gentle rise and fall of his chest calming her. There was something reassuring about him, a stability she hadn't realized she craved. But could she trust it? Her past experiences had taught her to be cautious, to guard her heart. Little One, the cat, a fluffy little creature with bright green eyes, stirred at the foot of the bed, stretching lazily before settling back down. Sayuri smiled at

the sight; the presence of the little feline was another comfort in this new environment. Feeling restless, she rolled onto her back and stared out the window. The unsighted moon cast a silvery glow over the leaves of the big tree in the front yard. It was beautiful and serene, a stark contrast to her chaotic thoughts.

“Maybe I just need to breathe,” she whispered to herself, closing her eyes for a moment. She focused on her breathing, trying to let go of the lingering worries. With each inhale, she imagined drawing in the tranquillity of the night, and with each exhale, she released her doubts. As she settled into a rhythm, she felt her body begin to relax. Perhaps with time, she would find her footing in this new life. For now, she was here, in this moment, with Richard and the gentle company of the cat. That was enough for now. Just as she felt herself drifting, she heard Richard shift beside her, his arm reaching back to find her. She smiled, a warmth enveloping her, and nestled closer to him, feeling a sense of peace wash over her. Slowly, her mind quieted, and she finally surrendered to sleep.

Sayuri was on the cusp of a dream, unsure if the gentle yet strong fingers caressing her back were real or not. She was not a morning person, and as she lay there, a soft fog of sleep still wrapped around her. She was also not a watch person and had no idea what time of day it was, but she was certain it was morning. The room was filled with a vibrant green light as the bright sun filtered forcefully through the emerald curtains, casting eerie shadows on the walls.

“Morning,” she heard Richard whisper close to her ear, his voice low and warm.

What time is it?” she asked, half yawning, the sound escaping her lips like a soft melody.

“Half past nine,” he replied, still stroking her back with those comforting fingers. “Would you like to sleep some more?”

Sayuri definitely wanted to sleep more. The idea of snuggling deeper into the covers, away from the demands of the day, was tempting, but she knew the routine. New lovers always wanted morning sex. The gentle rhythm of his touch continued, and Sayuri felt herself relax further, her body sinking into the mattress. She had never been one to enjoy mornings, but there was something about waking up next to Richard that made it feel different. There was a safety in his presence, a cocoon of warmth that wrapped around her. Suddenly conscious of her morning breath, she jumped out of bed and said, “Wait one minute. I need to brush my teeth quickly,” shivering at the thought of anyone kissing her potty mouth before she could brush. Not very romantic, sure, but necessary if she was to participate in intimate encounters at such an ungodly hour. After a quick brush and a cold-water facial, she pigeon-toed her way back to the bed feeling a lot more confident and prepared for what was about to come.

Like Richard, she had slept naked. Tokyo was more often than not too cold to allow her to do that, but the brutal Thai heat made it a wise choice. She got onto her knees and placed her head on his ripped abs, placing one hand on his chest while the other stroked his inner thigh. She knew, that no matter how long she lived, that she would

never tire of watching a man's member grow to full length. It was like a magic trick. She grasped it with one hand and teased him by flicking his tip with the tip of her tongue, smiling as he emitted a soft groan. Sayuri loved the feeling of power she enjoyed when seducing men. It never got old. Every man was ruled by his dick. She knew it, they knew it, and it would never change.

Side by side they sweated in unison, chests heaving from their recent exertions. Sayuri was definitely fully awake now. As she lay there, she felt a wave of contentment wash over her. She was in a new place, with a new life unfolding before her, and for the first time since leaving Ricky she felt hopeful. With a smile on her lips, she finally pushed herself to sit up, ready to embrace whatever the day held for her.

"I take shower now," she purred as she climbed over Richard's big frame to get out of bed.

"Ok, baby," Richard answered, giving her a smile of contentment.

Why do men always call us 'baby'? Sayuri wondered as she stooped to give him a quick peck on the cheek.

"Can I join you?" he asked expectantly.

"No," was her surprise response, but continued, "I need toilet," she explained. "Wait 5 minutes. Then you come, OK?"

"OK," Richard smiled, looking grateful for being thrown a bone.

The Thai-style bathroom was not a huge space, but it was functional enough for Sayuri's needs. In one corner sat a porcelain toilet bowl that required a hand flush with a bucket of water. Mounted on the wall was an electric shower heater, its shower head hanging limply; she had tried to use it, but due to the low water pressure, this proved futile. In the corner nearest the door, an old top-loading washing machine served as a makeshift counter for a bright pink plastic tub, where she now rinsed her hair. Sayuri preferred these all-in-one 'wet' bathrooms. They allowed for a carefree approach to cleanliness; you could make as big a mess as you wished and simply wash everything down the drain hole.

Just then, Richard knocked gently on the open door. She smiled glowingly at him, as his huge frame filled the doorway, the warmth of the moment causing her heart to flutter. She scooped water from the bright pink tub using a pale pink plastic scoop, rinsing her hair again. She noticed a quizzical look on his face as she rinsed her hair with both hands.

"What are you looking at?" she asked playfully, though she already had a good idea of what he was staring at. Her praying mantis stance had no doubt revealed the tiny

scars she had beneath each of her armpits. Tracing each scar gently with his forefinger, he asked, "What are these scars from?"

Sayuri met his gaze, a hint of pride mixed with nostalgia in her eyes. "When I was a teenager, I had not real breasts," she replied unabashedly, a soft laugh escaping her lips.

Richard smiled at her slightly imperfect English, his expression a blend of curiosity and admiration. "What happened to them? You don't have them anymore."

"I do not know," she said matter-of-factly, shrugging her shoulders. "I did not need them anymore."

His brow furrowed slightly, intrigued. "What do you mean by that?"

She paused, considering her words. "I was young and insecure. I wanted to fit in, to be like everyone else. But as I grew older, I realized it didn't matter. I learned to love myself as I am."

Richard's eyes softened, and he nodded in understanding. "That's a powerful lesson. It's not always easy to accept ourselves."

Sayuri smiled, her heart-warming at his response. "It took time, but I'm happy where I am now. Here in Thailand, I feel more free."

He stepped closer, leaning against the doorframe, his presence both comforting and protective. "I'm glad to hear that. You deserve to feel free and happy."

She felt a warmth spread through her at his words. "Thank you, Richard. You are a kind man."

"Call me Dick," he insisted.

"Thank you, Dick," she teased, making a joke of it by tugging playfully on his droopy dick.

"Can I help with anything?" he asked, a playful glint in his eye.

"No, I am finished. Your turn," she commanded, grabbing his wrist and guiding him nearer the pink tub of water. She dipped the scoop in the tub and slowly poured water over his head and began soaping his body.

"What is this this?" she asked, gently tracing a finger over the purplish mini-volcano located in the middle of his broad back that she had noticed while spooning.

"A lipoma," he replied.

"Look very bad," Sayuri said, concern in her voice.

"Really?" said Richard a bit nervously.

"Leally," she confirmed.

He smiled, “Rrrrrrrr.”

“What?” she asked, puzzled.

“Rrrreally – not leally,” he corrected her. She hated having her English corrected, but he was leaving soon, so she decided not to ruin the morning and just smiled at him.

“Lipoma? What is lipoma?” she asked as she fingered the lump on his spine, causing him to wince.

“It is a lump of fat under the skin,” he explained.

“Look very bad,” she said worriedly. “You have pain?” she asked as she prodded it with her forefinger, eliciting a yelp from Richard.

“Owwww!!”

“I must clean,” she decided. “Come,” she said as she led him out the bathroom by the hand, as if he were a child who had skinned his knee.

“Where is your medicine?” she asked scanning the changing room for any sign of a first aid kit.

“I only have plasters and this,” he said, holding up a bottle of rubbing alcohol.

Sayuri carefully tried to clean the infection with alcohol-soaked cotton wool but with limited success. The infection was sub-cutaneous – like a boil. She could see how brave Richard was trying to be, but she could tell from his contorted face and frequent flinches that he was suffering.

“You need doctor,” she decided, tossing a handful of dirty cottonwool into the nearby wastepaper basket.

“OK,” he agreed, “I go across road. They have hospital there.”

“I come with you,” she offered. She was genuinely concerned about the wound on his back. It looked serious. The wound was a dark red, indicating inflammation. It was the size of a big grape and its edges were irregular and swollen, with the surrounding tissue inflamed.

“No, it’s OK. There is nothing you can do to help me sitting in the hospital. But thank you for offering,” he smiled appreciatively at Sayuri. “Stay here and relax. I will see you soon. Do you need anything from the shop?”

“OK. You go hospital. I will go walk around town. No need to buy anything from shop. Thank you,” she decided, touching his arm in a gesture of sympathy.

Richard returned from the hospital, the soft sound of the sliding door closing behind him punctuating the quiet of the house. As he stepped into the bedroom, he saw Sayuri

lounging on the chaise longue, her laptop resting in her lap. Sunlight streamed through the window, casting a warm glow on her as she focused on the screen.

“Hi, my little geisha girl,” he greeted her playfully, a grin spreading across his face.

Sayuri’s smile faltered for a moment, annoyance flickering in her eyes. She disliked being called names that implied she was merely there to please men, even if it was said in jest. However, she quickly masked her irritation.

“Hell-ooo,” she purred, forcing a smile as she looked up at him. “What did the doctor say?”

“He said it’s not a lipoma. It looks like a cyst,” Richard replied, his tone shifting slightly as he recalled the doctor’s words.

“Oh! Is that good or bad?” Sayuri asked, concern creeping into her voice.

“It’s bad,” Richard admitted, the smile fading. “I asked him if he could cut it out, but he said it’s too close to the spine to operate.”

Sayuri’s expression softened, genuine worry etched on her features. “So, what will you do?”

“The doctor said I must keep it clean and he gave me some antibiotics and painkillers,” he said, holding up a see-through plastic bag containing boxes of tablets.

“Yes, you must look after yourself. I will help you keep it clean,” Sayuri offered, her voice steady and reassuring.

“Thank you,” Richard smiled at her, appreciating her warmth and care.

“The doctor has put a dressing on it,” he continued, turning his back to her and lifting his shirt slightly.

Sayuri’s eyes widened as she noticed how big the dressing was. “Good. It looks better. How are you feeling?” she asked, her voice gently probing.

“It’s a bit sore,” he replied, trying to downplay the discomfort.

“OK. Go lie on the bed. I will bring you water for your medicine. You must take it now,” she commanded, her tone leaving no room for argument. Richard chuckled, the sound lightening the mood. “Yes, ma’am.”

Sayuri placed her laptop on the table beside her and got up, moving toward the kitchen. As she filled a glass with water, she couldn’t shake the feeling of unease. She wanted to take care of him, to make sure he was okay, and she wondered if she was developing romantic feelings for him.

Don't be silly, she berated herself, you have just ended a serious relationship. Enjoy your freedom.

"Here you go," she said, returning to the bed with the glass in hand. "You need to take your medicine."

Richard settled onto the bed, propping himself up on one elbow as he accepted the glass. "Thanks, Sayuri. You would make a good nurse," he said sincerely, smiling at her. She waved her hand dismissively, though a shy smile crept onto her lips. "You need to get better."

He took the pills, swallowing them with a gulp of water. "I appreciate it. You spoil me. I could get used to it."

Sayuri felt a warmth spread through her at his words as she propped up the pillows for Richard, allowing him to sit more upright in bed. Richard lay back against the pillows, looking up at her with a mixture of gratitude and admiration. "I wish I didn't have to leave so soon," he admitted, a serious look taking hold of his face.

Sayuri was careful not to reply impulsively. Her heart wanted her to tell Richard that she would love nothing better than to spend more time living with him, but she knew herself. She knew that it had been impossible to have a long-term relationship with anybody since she had been a teenager. Ken had been her last long-term boyfriend. Well, sort of. They hadn't lived together. Not only had he been married, but he had also been acutely aware of the age difference between them, so she had lived in her own apartment – paid for by Ken, of course. It had been their 'love nest.' So, choosing her words carefully, she replied, "That would be nice."

Richard smiled, the tension in his body easing a little, as he watched Sayuri climb over him carefully to get to 'her' side of the bed, which was pushed into one corner of the big main bedroom.

"Just rest now. I'll be right here," she said, resting her head on his muscular chest. She felt a comforting sense of intimacy as she rested one hand on his thigh, tracing gentle patterns on his skin. Richard turned to her, his expression curious, inviting her to share more about herself.

"Do you have any brothers and sisters?" he asked, his voice low and gentle.

"Yes. I have two sisters," Sayuri replied, glancing up at him with a small smile.

"Older or younger?" he inquired, genuinely interested.

"Both older," she said, her tone lightening a bit. "Keiko and Atsuko."

"And your parents? Are they still alive?" Richard asked, his curiosity piqued.

Sayuri hesitated, her expression shifting to something more serious. The topic of her parents felt heavy, and she debated whether to share the truth with him. She could feel the weight of his gaze, patient and understanding, as he waited for her to respond.

“My mother lives alone in Tokyo,” she finally answered, her voice soft.

Not comfortable with the direction the conversation was taking, Sayuri decided to steer it in a different direction. “And you? Do you have any brothers and sisters?” she asked, her curiosity bubbling back to the surface.

“I have one older brother. He lives in South Africa with his wife and two daughters,” Richard replied. “We don’t talk much.”

“Why you not talk?” she inquired.

“We are very different,” Richard replied. “Do you know what ‘black sheep’ means in English?”

“Black sheep,” Sayuri repeated. “No. What does it mean?”

“Someone in the family who does things differently. I think it will be difficult to explain in English.”

“I think I understand,” Sayuri said, nodding slightly. “In my family, I am black sheep too,” she smiled at him, raising the palm of her hand to receive a ‘high five’ from Richard. “We are the house of the black sheep,” she chuckled.

“And your parents?” Sayuri pressed gently, wanting to know more. “Are they alive?”

Richard’s smile faded slightly. “My mother is dead. More than 15 years now. She had Parkinson’s disease. Do you know what that is?” he asked, gauging her reaction. Sayuri shook her head, picking up her phone from the bedside table. “No. How do you spell the name?”

“Give your phone to me. I will type it in,” Richard offered, reaching out.

“No, I will do it,” she insisted, determined to understand.

“Okay. It is spelled: P-A-R-K-I-N-S-O-N-S,” he said slowly, enunciating each letter.

“*Pākinson-byō*,” Sayuri repeated in Japanese, her brow furrowing slightly as she processed the information. “Yes, I understand,” she acknowledged, her tone shifting to one of empathy.

“My father is still alive. He also lives in South Africa,” Richard continued, his voice softer now. He hesitated before asking, “Where is your father?”

Sayuri felt a wave of discomfort rise within her. “I will tell you one day,” she promised, a hint of sadness in her eyes. “I don’t like to talk about it.”

“Okay, baby,” Richard said playfully, turning his head to place a soft kiss on her lips, knowing that he must drop the subject.

They cuddled in silence, the intimacy of their shared vulnerability creating a bond that felt unbreakable. Sayuri nestled deeper into Richard's embrace, grateful for his patience and understanding. In that quiet space, she felt a sense of peace, knowing that she didn't have to rush her story. For now, being together was enough.

CHAPTER 29

Sayuri stepped out of the shower, the steam swirling around her as she adjusted the big yellow towel wrapped snugly around her frame. The warmth clung to her skin, a comforting reminder of the relaxing shower she had just enjoyed. The bathroom connected to a small changing room that Richard used as a walk-in closet. A clothes rack on wheels stood against one wall, while a small dressing table occupied the opposite side, complete with a rectangular mirror above it.

As she caught her reflection, Sayuri felt a twinge of self-consciousness. She knew she was pretty—at least she had been in her youth—but the passage of time had made her increasingly aware of the signs of aging. The soft lines around her eyes and the subtle changes in her skin made her nervous. She preferred to shower alone, taking her time to shave her legs and apply moisturizer, cherishing these moments of self-care. She dyed her hair once a week, a ritual that made her feel more vibrant.

Today, she stood at the dressing table, applying discreet makeup, enjoying the ample space in the house. She had never lived in such a large place before; it felt wonderful to have room to breathe and express herself. As she applied her eye shadow, her mind drifted back to the night before.

Richard had just finished eating the curry she had prepared for supper, the rich spices still lingering in the air. They had settled onto the sofa, the dim light casting a warm glow around them, and she had suggested they watch anime. Richard had confessed he had never watched it before, and the excitement in her voice had surprised even her.

“Leally? You’ve never seen any?” she had asked, her eyes wide with disbelief.

“Nope,” he had replied, chuckling. “I think I watched one episode of *Dragon Ball Z* many years ago.”

She had chosen *Blood of Zeus*, hoping that it might appeal to Richard, and as they watched together, she had felt a sense of joy bubbling inside her. She loved sharing a part of her culture with him, and seeing his genuine curiosity had made her heart swell. She could tell that he had no clue about anime or Japanese culture, but still they had laughed together at the quirky characters and outrageous plot twists, the comfort of companionship wrapping around them like a warm blanket.

Now, as she finished applying her makeup, Sayuri couldn’t help but smile at the memory. The connection they shared felt so easy, so natural. She had always been cautious about opening up to someone new, but Richard was different. He made her feel seen and appreciated, and that was something she hadn’t expected.

But then he had ruined the moment by asking her if she felt like sex. She smiled to herself in the mirror as she remembered the shock on his face when she had said, “No!”. She had expected that to be the end of that, but she had underestimated his tenacity. She was used to living in a patriarchal Japanese society where men seldom had their

wishes denied, but she was free from all that now and was determined not to be bullied into having sex against her will.

She enjoyed having sex with Richard. He was a kind and considerate lover and she delighted in his tantric approach to sex. Sayuri really liked him, but because of her father having been emotionally and physically unavailable, she had never learnt to interact with men in a healthy way. Having an indifferent father led her to fear that she didn't deserve love.

Confidence and self-esteem were not the same thing. Sayuri knew that she could accomplish anything that she put her mind to. She had confidence in her abilities. But when it came to self-image, she had always felt inferior to other women. She suspected that Richard was similar to her in that regard – that he was a very able and confident man, but was not satisfied with his self-image.

One did not need a degree in psychology to figure people out. In her many years working in Tokyo, she had learned to adapt her outward persona to please the man she was currently with, knowing instinctively which buttons to press. Despite being aware that her 'daddy issues' had hardwired her to allow herself to be treated poorly by men, she was determined to break the cycle. Ever since her 3-year liaison with Ken Watanabe, she had made a habit of dating much older or more dominant men. Lacking a "father protector" during childhood, she spent her youth looking for men to care for her, and sometimes dominate her, emotionally and financially.

Since leaving the massage parlour, she had managed to break the cycle of financial dependence on men, but she had so far not managed stop being a serial monogamist - dating men for only a few months at a time, to avoid emotional entanglement with one person. Sayuri knew how dangerous love could be. She now lived by the motto: "Prevention is better than cure."

Yes, there were roots of emotional attachment growing deep inside her, but Richard was leaving in a few days, and it would be reckless and irresponsible to allow the roots to get too entrenched. It had been difficult for her to say no to Richard's sexual advances, but she knew that it was for the best, like a loving parent laying down the law for the greater good, taking emotion out of the equation.

Undeterred by her emphatic 'No', Richard had placed her hand on his crotch and said, "Hand job?"

"No. I'm not your sex toy."

She had tried to say it firmly enough to thwart his sexual advances, but she had not raised her voice or complained further – noticing that he had received the message. She couldn't really blame him for trying. She knew that she was a good lover and that sex could be more addictive than heroin. Not that she had ever had heroin, but she had enough experience with straight men to know that sex ruled their brains. It was probably true of gay people as well, but that was just an assumption on her part. In any case, he got the message loud and clear – there would be no hanky panky that night. Richard had

accepted his defeat graciously and had gone to fetch two ice cold beers from the refrigerator – his way of saying sorry.

Richard had told her on the day that they had met that he was a night owl, but his idea of a night owl was different to hers. She noticed that he was usually in bed by ten, whereas she loved to lie on her yoga mat and stretch for a few hours while she caught up with her social media and health podcasts. It suited her just fine to have him snoring away a few feet away while she enjoyed her peace and quiet. Strangely, his nearness made her feel safe and protected, despite the occasional increase in volume of his nasal symphony. She rarely fell asleep before 2am, but Richard was now thoughtful enough not to wake her before she showed signs of stirring in the morning.

With one last glance in the mirror, she felt satisfied with her appearance. The makeup enhanced her features without masking her true self. Smoothing her towel, she decided it was time to join Richard. Feeling slightly guilty for rejecting him the night before, she had initiated the sex that morning, knowing that he would be as grateful as a sunflower turning towards the sun. And he most certainly was, skilfully teasing her until she had an explosion of pleasure, convulsing long after the eruption. A truly divine experience that she could not recall ever having before. She was elated to spend another day with him.

As she stepped out of the changing room, she heard Richard humming softly from the living area, a tune she recognized from the anime they had watched. The sound drew her in, and she couldn't help but smile as she approached, ready to share another moment together.

“Hi baby,” he greeted her, smiling, as he noticed her arrival.

“Hi, honey,” she beamed, as she sat next to him on the sofa. She was not a fan of the word ‘baby’, so she had decided not to reciprocate, instead choosing a term of endearment she had seen on American TV. He had told her to call him Dick, but she doubted she could do that with a straight face.

“I made you some coffee,” he said, pointing to the matching coffee mugs he had bought the day before, each with a large red and white ‘lucky *neko*’ cat print. Sayuri loved how thoughtful Richard was.

“*Arigato gozaimasu*,” she thanked him in Japanese.

“I guess that is Japanese for ‘Thank you’,” he said.

“Hai! You can learn some Japanese. I have to talk English to you all day, so now you have to study Japanese,” she said playfully.

“I would love to learn Japanese,” he replied earnestly, “if we ever meet again, I promise I will speak to you in Japanese.”

“Ok-aaay,” she replied, spitting on her palm and offering it to Richard to seal the deal with a handshake. He paused, looked at her for a brief moment and she watched as his huge paw enveloped her tiny hand, giving it a firm shake.

“Deal!” he announced, letting go of her hand, reaching for his packet of L&Ms on the coffee table. He lit a cigarette and shifted away from her in an obvious attempt to be considerate of the fact that she was a non-smoker. Looking at her thoughtfully, he asked, “Did you ever smoke?”

“Hai!” she replied. “I smoked for many years. I gave up when I fell pregnant.”

“Pregnant? You have children?” he asked in amazement.

“Hai! When I was 27, I got pregnant.”

“Boy or girl?” he pursued.

“Girl. Her name is Naomi.”

“Nice name. Where does she live? Japan?”

“Hai! She is studying at university in Japan,” she replied, hoping that Richard would stop asking questions about previous relationships as she was beginning to feel uncomfortable. He seemed to read her mind.

“I don’t want to be rude, but I am curious. How old are you? I am no good at guessing women’s age,” he asked, sidestepping the subject.

“Forty-eight. And you?” It was a lie. She was only forty-seven, but she always made it higher because she suspected that she looked older than she felt and didn’t want people to think, *“Wow! She looks a bit worn for her age!”*

Richard had hesitated before replying, “Fifty-eight. I’ll be fifty-nine in October.”

“Leally!” she said excitedly. “I am also in October. What date are you?”

“11th. And you?”

“18th.”

Sayuri was not a believer in star signs, so she did not take it as a sign of their compatibility. It was a question of Math. If there were approximately 8 billion people on the planet and there were only twelve star signs, which meant that 100s of millions of people supposedly had the same personality. Her logical brain did not allow herself to believe in horoscopes - nor religion for that matter.

“I will have to come back to Thailand for your birthday,” he said. Sayuri knew that he was only half joking.

Sayuri spent long hours designing websites on her computer during that first week living with Richard. The rhythm of her work was punctuated by moments of warmth and affection, each break inviting her to cuddle with him as he read in bed. Richard had a

way of making her feel at ease, his focus on the pages of his book creating a cozy atmosphere that wrapped around her like a soft blanket.

As a solo traveller, she had missed the intimacy of a relationship. Ricky had been her first relationship of substance since she had left Japan. There were many things she had not yet told Richard, and uncertainty nagged at her about how much she should reveal before he left Thailand.

She had her secrets—like her past encounters in hostels, fleeting moments of physical connection that had filled a purely biological need. But those experiences were nothing compared to the emotional intimacy she felt with Richard. It was different with him; it was deeper. Lying beside him, she would trace her fingers over his body gently, savouring the warmth of his skin as he read PDF books on his laptop. Their growing connection felt genuine, yet the looming spectre of his imminent departure cast a bittersweet shadow over her heart.

How cruel life can be, she thought, her mind spiralling into a whirlpool of conflicting emotions. I finally feel a strong connection to someone, and now they are leaving me.

She knew he had previous commitments, and there was nothing she could say or do to change that. Part of her didn't want to say anything anyway. She believed in the idea that people came into your life for a reason, a season, or a lifetime. Yes, she would miss him terribly, but deep down, she understood her own flaws—how difficult she found long-term relationships. The truth haunted her: she was incapable of settling down with a man forever.

Her emotional trauma loomed like a heavy cloud, whispering that her past would forever prevent her from having a normal, lasting bond. *There is no pain like the pain of watching oneself overtaken by one's most shameful parts...*, she mused, feeling the chaotic pull of her fears, *"...the compulsive, the ungenerous, the needy, governed by fear and uncertainty."*

As she watched Richard, a part of her brain rationalized that it was good he was leaving before she had a chance to break his heart. If he stayed in Nong Pai for her, she knew it was inevitable that she would leave him first. And that would shatter him. She could see how much he loved her. Or was it just lust? The question lingered, a thorn in her heart. Did he truly understand her, or was he captivated by the idea of her?

"Sayuri?" Richard's voice pulled her from her thoughts, breaking the spell of her introspection. He glanced over at her, his brow slightly furrowed with concern. "Are you okay? You've been quiet."

She offered a small smile, hoping to mask the turmoil within. "Just thinking," she replied softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

"About what?" He set his laptop aside, giving her his full attention, the warmth of his gaze making her heart race.

“About us,” she admitted, surprised at her own honesty. “About... life.”

Richard studied her for a moment, his expression shifting to something more serious. “You know, I’m really glad we met. This time with you has been special.”

“Special?” she echoed, the word hanging in the air between them. It felt both sweet and painfully bittersweet.

“Yes,” he said, reaching out to take her hand. “I feel like we have something real, a strong connection.”

Her heart ached at his sincerity, and she felt a wave of vulnerability wash over her. “But you have to go,” she said, the reality settling within her like a heavy stone.

“I do,” he replied, his voice steady. “But that doesn’t change what we have now. I want to make the most of our time together, whatever that looks like.”

Sayuri squeezed his hand, her mind troubled by conflicting thoughts. Could she allow herself to savour these moments, knowing they were finite? The connection they shared felt so real, but the fear of losing it loomed large. “I want that too,” she said, her voice trembling slightly. “I just... I don’t want to hurt you.”

Richard's gaze softened, and he brought her hand to his lips, kissing it gently. “The heart wants what it wants. I don’t think it is possible to avoid pain when it comes to relationships. It is part of the package.”

As she looked into his eyes, she felt a flicker of hope mingling with her fears. For now, they had each other, and that was enough. But the shadows of her past still danced in the corners of her mind, whispering doubts that would take time to silence. Yet, in this moment, she chose to embrace the connection they had, however fleeting it might be.

“Have you ever had sex with Jolene?” Sayuri asked suddenly, her tone surprisingly direct.

Richard was briefly startled by the question. “No,” he replied, keeping his voice steady.

“So, you and Jolene were not together?” she probed, her eyes narrowing slightly.

“No,” he confirmed again, his gaze firm.

Sayuri had never met Jolene. All she knew was that Ricky was a friend of Jolene’s.

Sayuri nodded, processing the information. “I see.”

And that was that. The end of the conversation hung in the air between them, a silence that felt both comfortable and charged. Sayuri was not sure why she had suddenly got jealous about the idea of Richard having sex with Jolene. It was very unlike her. A minute ago, the thought of the two of them having sex had made her feel jealous, but now, her new-found capacity to *be* jealous troubled her more. *What is happening to me?* she

thought, as she felt Richard take hold of her hand and squeeze it gently, a silent promise that there was more to explore between them.

“Want to watch something?” he suggested, trying to shift the mood. “I found a new anime series we could check out together.”

Sayuri's face brightened at the change of subject. “Yes! That sounds good,” she replied, her excitement palpable.

CHAPTER 30

And then it was over. One of the best weeks of her life had come to a close, and Sayuri was savouring their last moments together.

The last supper was in progress as she and Richard sat together on the sofa, an array of Thai delicacies on the coffee table before them. Sayuri took a bite of a small spicy sausage, its heat igniting her taste buds, and washed it down with a long swig from a can of cold Chang. She relished the flavours of the street food she had picked up from the bustling night market—each morsel a reminder of the memories they had made together.

A movie played on Netflix in the background, the screen flickering with colourful images, but neither of them was paying it any mind. Richard sat next to her, engrossed in his thoughts, occasionally stealing glances at the screen. Sayuri was in her own world, scrolling through her phone, catching up on emails and messages that she had delayed responding to in favour of spending more time with Richard.

She could work in complete silence, if necessary, but she preferred a bit of background noise. During the day, it was usually 70s rock bands—Queen was her favourite - and she took delight in the fact that Richard shared that same love. But at night, the TV was her go-to distraction. It was a perfect excuse to focus on her phone without feeling guilty for ignoring the person beside her.

“I’ve always liked this actress” Richard suddenly said, breaking the comfortable silence as he glanced at the screen and noticed Kristin Bell was playing a lead role in the movie.

“Hmm?” Sayuri replied, not looking up. She was busy liking a photo from her friend’s recent vacation, her thumb scrolling rapidly.

Richard chuckled, shaking his head. “Not important. I just said that I like her,” he repeated, pointing at Kristin Bell on the TV.

“She’s pretty,” Sayuri smiled, glancing up from her phone for a split second. “Sorry. I’m just catching up on things,” she said, finally looking at him. “You know how it is—work never really stops.”

“Yes. There never seem to be enough hours in a day,” he replied, taking a sip of his drink.

She nodded, appreciating his sentiment. “I agree. I just don’t want you to feel like I’m being rude if I’m not paying attention to the movie.”

Richard waved a dismissive hand. “You’re fine. It doesn’t bother me. Just being in the same space is enough for me.”

His words warmed her heart, and she felt a flutter of gratitude. Richard had been an unexpected joy in her life, a connection that seemed to flow effortlessly, even amidst the chaos of their busy schedules. As Sayuri scrolled through her social media feed, she felt a pang of sadness creeping in. It had been a good week – a whirlwind of laughter, adventure, and honest conversations, but reality was setting in.

Tonight would be her first night alone in the big house. It was a daunting prospect. She would just have to bury herself in her routine, spending long hours designing websites and juggling a thousand tasks. As she took another sip of her drink, she glanced at Richard, grateful for the connection they had forged. The world outside might be chaotic, but in this moment, with the warmth of the street food in her belly and Richard by her side, everything felt just right.

“I come with you to the train station,” Sayuri announced, finishing her second can of beer and placing it on the coffee table with a satisfying clink.

Richard shook his head, a smile tugging at his lips. “We cannot go on the scooter. My luggage is too big. I will have to take a tuk-tuk.”

“Oh. OK. I will follow the tuk-tuk on scooter,” she suggested, feeling a mix of determination and sadness.

“OK. That will be good. Thank you,” Richard replied, his gratitude evident in his eyes.

Sayuri felt a twinge in her chest. She wasn’t holding out any hope of seeing Richard again after this week, but the least she could do was see him off at the train station.

“Leave the plates on the table. I will clean up when I come back,” she ordered, trying to inject some normalcy into the moment.

“OK,” Richard agreed, his voice light. “OK, let’s go,” he announced, a hint of excitement returning to his voice.

His backpack and duffel bag were already packed and waiting by the front door. He handed Sayuri the scooter key and leaned in to give her a quick peck on the lips, a tender gesture that sent a flutter through her stomach.

“OK, baby. See you at the station. I’m going to walk across the road to the hospital. There are always tuk-tuks there.”

“OK,” Sayuri replied, feeling a sorrowful smile creep onto her face.

As Richard walked away, she watched him go, the catalogue of their shared moments flooding her mind. She hopped onto Jolene’s scooter, revving the engine for 15 seconds to warm the engine before pulling off. When she reached the small train station, she parked the scooter across from the entrance. It was a modest place, nothing like the grand stations in Europe, China, or Japan.

Sayuri spotted Richard standing on the sidewalk alongside his bags. She duck-walked across the road to join him, bringing an inevitable smile to his face. But the smile quickly morphed into a sad puppy dog expression, and her heart twisted at the sight.

“Hey,” she said softly, trying to chase away the heaviness settling between them.

“Hey,” Richard replied, attempting a smile, his voice barely above a whisper.

She wanted to reach out, to comfort him, but the weight of the moment held her back. *You’re starting to get sad*, she thought, feeling her own emotions swell. The only Shakespeare line that had ever stuck with her popped into her brain: “*Parting is such sweet sorrow.*” It felt so true in this moment.

Sayuri bent over and grabbed one handle of Richard's duffel bag, wanting to help him carry it. She had seen him struggling with it as he left the house, and the urge to assist him was strong. He chuckled, shaking his head.

“Whaaat?” Sayuri asked, tugging on the handle with determination.

“You're going to hurt yourself, baby. It is very heavy. I can do it. It's OK. The train is only 20 meters away,” Richard assured her, his smile warm but concerned. Not wanting to be seen as weak, Sayuri mustered all her strength and gave the handle another yank. She almost tore her arm off.

“Wow! How do you travel with this heavy bag?” she laughed, embarrassment mixing with genuine amazement as she released the handle.

“It’s not easy,” he replied, his tone light. He paused for a moment, then took off his backpack, a glint of mischief in his eyes. “You can help me by carrying my backpack,” he offered, handing it to her.

Sayuri felt a rush of warmth; he was only trying to make her feel better, and it worked. She wanted to feel useful. Taking the backpack with both hands, she adjusted it on her shoulders, feeling the weight settle comfortably. Richard seized both handles of the duffel bag and slowly swung it over his shoulder, letting it hang behind him. Sayuri watched as the strain showed on his face, the bag digging into his shoulder.

“You are a strong man,” she remarked, genuinely impressed.

He chuckled, the sound light despite the burden he carried. “The shape of the bag makes it worse. It’s like trying to lift a futon.”

“Oh yes!” Sayuri exclaimed, her eyes lighting up with understanding. “Futons are very difficult to move.”

Richard laughed, a genuine sound that cut through the tension of the moment. “Exactly! They’re awkward and heavy, just like this bag.”

As they approached the train platform, Sayuri could feel the camaraderie between them growing stronger despite the impending farewell.

“I can’t believe you packed this much,” she teased, glancing at the bulging duffel bag. “Did you bring your entire wardrobe?”

“I was in Europe last winter – before I came to Thailand. Winter clothes are heavy. She chuckled, shaking her head. Richard smiled, but it was tinged with the bittersweet reality of their situation. They reached the platform, and a middle-aged ticket conductor greeted them in English, “Good evening. Ticket, please.”

Richard smiled and pulled out his ticket, which he had bought the day before. Sayuri remembered their earlier conversation about it. When she had asked him why he planned ahead, he had said he was a careful traveller, always buying tickets in advance. She had looked at him in horror, unable to hide her disbelief.

“What?” he had asked, curious.

“I don’t do that,” she replied, omitting the fact that she was an impulsive traveller, often succumbing to sudden urges to pack up and go. She couldn’t count how many times she had thrown her belongings into a bag and rushed to the train station, only to find no tickets available, forcing her to sleep in the waiting area. It was just the way it was—no doubt a result of some childhood trauma that she had never fully unpacked.

“Calliage number eleven,” the conductor said, pointing toward a nearby carriage.

“Thank you,” Richard replied, glancing at Sayuri with a grin. “He talks like you.”

Sayuri’s laughter bubbled up, her heart lightening at his playful jab. She stuck her tongue out at him, enjoying the brief reprieve from the heaviness of their impending goodbye. As they moved toward the carriage, Sayuri reflected on one of the many wonderful things she liked about Thailand: the efficiency, friendliness, and professionalism of the government employees. It reminded her of Japan, where such values were deeply ingrained in the culture.

Reaching carriage number eleven, Richard manhandled his “futon” above the steep 3-rung ladder and onto the floor of the carriage, where it was at eye level. Once he was up, Sayuri joined him in the passageway, still tightly clutching his backpack as he scanned the seat numbers.

“Ah! Here we are. Number 28. LOWER BUNK,” he announced triumphantly.

With a grunt, he wrestled the duffel bag onto the overhead luggage rack, the effort twisting his face into a mix of concentration and determination. He then took the backpack from Sayuri and placed it on the seat, a small victory in their logistical battle. Sayuri stood there, at a loss for words. What does one say when they’ve unexpectedly fallen in love just as the other person is about to leave the country? It was time to say goodbye for good. But she didn’t want to. She felt trapped in a whirlpool of undefined emotions, unable to escape.

Snap out of it! she berated herself silently. *It was fun. Move on!*

But there was no denying it—she was going to miss him more than a week of heavenly pleasure warranted. She tried to rationalize it. It was just a passionate fling—a holiday romance. But was it really? She agreed with him that the heart wants what the heart wants, and he was a sweet, kind, gentle, and decent human being. She knew he had strong feelings for her, too.

It was time to say goodbye. He stood awkwardly in the aisle, looking down at her, making an obvious effort to control his expression. Sayuri, too, was unsure of what to say or do. A pregnant pause ensued, stretching between them like an invisible cord.

“Do you have email?” Richard suddenly blurted out, breaking the silence.

Sayuri was pleasantly surprised. “Yes!” she blurted back, her voice a little too enthusiastic.

“Do you mind giving it to me? I want to email you a book,” he said, his tone hopeful.

She remembered him mentioning he was a writer but hadn’t thought much of it. Now, it felt like he needed an excuse to bridge the awkward silence.

“OK,” Sayuri agreed.

Richard opened the NOTEPAD app on his phone and handed it to her. She typed in her email address, her fingers dancing over the screen, each tap echoing her mixed feelings. She entered her LINE number as well – her preferred communication app. She hadn’t mentioned it to Richard, but she rarely checked her personal email – only her business one.

“Thank you,” he grinned, and the warmth of his smile sent a flutter through her stomach.

“OK,” she replied, suddenly realizing that she was so troubled by his departure that she could only manage one-word sentences. In an impulsive moment, she stood on her tiptoes and planted a gentle kiss on his lips—a very un-Japanese thing to do.

She could see an instant bulge form in his pants, and she smiled at her own magical powers. Not wanting the moment to get any more awkward, she mustered a soft, “See you,” then turned and walked away, fighting the urge to look back at this surprising man who had come into her life. Was it for a reason? Or would they share a season in the not-too-distant future?

As she stepped off the train and headed back toward the platform, Sayuri was hit by a wave of unfamiliar emotions. *He has my email. It’s up to him now*, she decided, her heart racing as she hopped onto her scooter.

The ride back to the big, empty house felt surreal. The streets of Nong Pai blurred around her, the vibrant colours and sounds fading into a backdrop for her thoughts. She replayed the moments they shared—the laughter, the adventures, the quiet conversations that had felt so intimate.

Arriving home, she parked the scooter and took a deep breath, dreading entering the big, empty house – alone. The scent of the Mekong River mingled with her own bittersweet longing. Sayuri knew that things had changed within her; she had opened her heart in a way she never expected.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she stared at her phone, the screen dim and still. *Will he reach out?* she wondered, her heart pounding with a mix of excitement and anxiety. *Has he even looked at what I wrote on his phone? Does he have airtime?* The uncertainty loomed like a shadow, but she pushed it aside for now.

In that moment, she allowed herself to feel—feel the thrill of possibility and the ache of separation. With Richard’s memory fresh in her mind, she knew she would cherish this unexpected chapter, no matter how fleeting it might be.

CHAPTER 31

In the warm, inviting kitchen of Jolene's house, Sayuri was busy preparing a comforting Japanese meal. The fragrant aroma of simmering dashi and the soft sizzle of vegetables filled the air, creating a cozy atmosphere. Just as she reached for a packet of nori, her phone pinged from the lounge. Her heart skipped a beat instinctively at the sound. Like Pavlov's dog, she rushed to grab her phone, her excitement bubbling over. It was a message from Richard.

Hello baby. How are you doing? Any problems?

Sayuri smiled, her heart lifting at the familiar greeting.

Everything is OK. It seems that the rainy season has started, and it has been raining since last night.

Did you dance naked in the rain?

Of course!

Send pics of naked dance.

Maybe...tomorrow

I was joking, my love

I know.

She liked a man with a sense of humour. Ricky had a lot in common with her, but he lacked proper a sense of humour. His American-style attempts at humour had irked her.

What are you doing?

I am cooking.

She suddenly remembered the pot of noodles bubbling away and hurried back to stir it.

Oh! OK. I am just messaging to let you know that I have arrived safely in Manila and that I am missing you. A big red heart punctuated the sentence.

I am glad you are safe. I miss you too.

She felt a rush of warmth and connection, the distance between them shrinking with each message.

OK baby. Enjoy your supper. I'll message you again soon.

OK honey. Have a good time. See you.

See you.

Sayuri set her phone down, her spirits buoyed by the exchange. She returned to her cooking, a smile lingering on her face as she finished preparing the meal. The sound of rain pattering against the windows felt like a gentle rhythm, soothing her heart. That night, as she settled into bed, the comforting thoughts of Richard filled her mind. For the first time since he left, she slept deeply.

The sun was setting as Sayuri sat curled up on the oversized couch, her laptop resting on a cushion on her lap. The house was eerily quiet, the only sounds coming from the occasional rustle of leaves outside and the chirping of the birds in the trees. She got up to close the sliding door, having learned the hard way that the mosquitos became very active at dusk.

For three weeks, she had been housesitting in this peaceful little town of Nong Pai, a stark contrast to the hustle and bustle of Tokyo. The solitude felt both liberating and isolating. Despite her natural inclination towards solitude, she found herself craving the background hum of city life—the chatter of people, the distant sound of trains, and the vibrant energy that seemed to pulse through Tokyo's streets.

With only a few days left before her trip to Japan, anticipation bubbled within her. She was pleased to be flying out of Bangkok, a city that felt like a smaller, more laid-back version of Tokyo. The thought of exploring the Japanese shops in Bangkok enthralled her; they reminded her of home, a piece of familiarity amidst the chaos of her current surroundings.

Suddenly, her phone buzzed, pulling her from her thoughts. It was a message from Richard. She opened her LINE app, her heart quickening slightly.

Hey, baby. How are things?

She typed back quickly. I'm good! Just getting ready to leave Nong Pai. I'll be away for 10 days for the EIKEN exam.

Richard replied almost instantly.

Oh right, your English exam! How are you feeling about it?

Pretty nervous, she admitted, biting her lip. It's a big deal for me.

Richard's response was reassuring.

Your English is very good. You'll do great! I know you will!

Sayuri smiled at his words, but a knot of anxiety still twisted in her stomach. She had impulsively booked the exam a week after Richard had left, deciding that an EIKEN certificate would make it easier for her chosen life as a digital nomad.

What about the cat? she messaged.

Ask the neighbours to feed her while you're gone. They're nice and will help out, Richard suggested.

She felt a wave of relief. It was good to know she wouldn't have to worry about the cat while she was away.

Thanks, honey. I'll ask them. Can't wait to get back to Japan, even if it's just for a bit! I miss my mom.

Message me when you are on the train to Bangkok. OK?

Yes, sir!

Thanks. Take care. See you.

See you.

As she set her phone down, Sayuri glanced around the large, empty house. The silence felt heavier now, almost suffocating. She needed to do something to shake off the feeling of isolation. She grabbed her notebook and pen, a habit she had developed during her time alone. Flipping the pages, she began to jot down her thoughts, creating a list of what she wanted to accomplish during her trip—things she wanted to see, foods she wanted to eat, and, of course, her hopes for the EIKEN exam.

- *Visit my favourite coffee shop*
- *Explore the bookstores in Shinjuku.*
- *Take a walk in Ueno Park.*
- *Study for exam.*
- *Go to SHIROI ramen shop in Shibuya*
- *See Keiko and Atsuko*

With each line, her excitement grew, momentarily pushing aside her nerves. As she wrote, she could almost hear the sounds of Tokyo—the laughter of workers relaxing in the *izakayas*; the soft murmur of people discussing their day; the clickety-click of the trains as they sped across the sprawling city. It was a comforting thought, one that made her feel a little less alone in this quiet house. She was looking forward to staying with her mother whilst in Tokyo. She had always felt guilty for persuading her mother to divorce her father, although, at the time, it had seemed like the best option for the family. But now, her heart ached every time she thought of how lonely her mother was living alone. Keiko and Atsuko had left home over 20 years ago and Sayuri doubted that she would ever shake the burden of guilt that she carried around like a heavy backpack.

Finishing her list, she set her notebook aside and decided to prepare a simple dinner. Cooking always helped clear her mind. As she moved around the kitchen, chopping

vegetables and boiling water, she thought of the bustling streets of Bangkok and Tokyo, filled with life and possibility. In just a few days, she would be back in that vibrant world, hopefully ready to face the challenges Tokyo presented. With a renewed sense of purpose, Sayuri smiled to herself, her heart lightening with each stir of the pot.

CHAPTER 32

Sayuri walked down the bustling streets of Shibuya, Tokyo, a vibrant mix of sounds and colours swirling around her. The summer sun bathed the city in a warm glow, and she was grateful for the season, as the cold Tokyo winters had always left her feeling down.

As she strolled, she took in the latest fashion trends, her eyes darting from one stylish passerby to another. *Fashion seems to repeat itself every 20 years*, she mused, watching a group of young girls strut down the sidewalk in frayed denim shorts and crop tops, their laughter mingling with the city's rhythm.

Approaching her favourite coffee shop, Sayuri felt a familiar buzz of excitement. Just then, a man in his 50s, dressed in casual button-up shirt and dark lightweight trousers, exited the café.

"Sayuri-chan!" he exclaimed as they were about to pass each other.

Startled, Sayuri slowed her pace, her heart racing. Not everyone in Tokyo was her friend, and something about the man's demeanour sparked a flicker of unease. She glanced at him, her gaze lingering as she tried to place him. His presence was too familiar, reminiscent of Yakuza members she had once known during a tumultuous chapter of her life. Just as she was about to look away, her eyes caught the Harry Potter-like scar on his forehead. A flash of recognition washed over her.

"Masashi? Is that you?" she asked, disbelief colouring her voice.

"Hai!" he grinned, stepping forward. A wry smile played on his lips. "Sayuri-San," he said, his voice low and measured. "I am surprised to see you. It has been years."

Sayuri's heartbeat slowed as memories flooded back. Masashi had been a mid-level lieutenant for the Yamaguchi-gumi clan, responsible for drug distribution in Shibuya. Sayuri remembered that he had always been on her side, a steadfast presence amidst the chaos. Despite his past, she had sensed a certain warmth from him, an unspoken affection that lingered in the shadows of their shared history.

"I'm surprised to see you as well," she replied, a smile breaking through her initial apprehension.

Masashi chuckled, his eyes glinting with a hint of amusement. "Were you going to have a coffee? Let me get you a coffee," he offered eagerly, holding the door of the coffee shop open for her. "We have a lot of catching up to do."

Sayuri hesitated for the briefest moment, weighing her options. Masashi had never given her a reason to feel unsafe; they had always gotten along well.

"OK," she agreed, stepping into the coffee shop, the familiar scent of roasted beans wrapping around her like a warm embrace.

As they settled at a small table by the window, Sayuri couldn't help but feel a mix of nostalgia and curiosity. Masashi's presence stirred memories she thought she had buried, but there was something reassuring about his demeanour now—more relaxed, less burdened by the weight of his former role as the main drug dealer in Shibuya. She stirred her coffee absentmindedly, her mind flickering back to the past she had tried so hard to escape.

“Where have you been hiding for the last 20 years?” Masashi asked, genuine curiosity in his eyes. “The last I heard, you left Tokyo when Shinji Matsumoto took over that part of Shibuya from Ken Watanabe.”

A chill ran down Sayuri's spine at the mention of Shinji's name, memories of that dreadful day flooding her mind. It was a day that still haunted her, replaying in her nightmares like an unwanted film loop.

“It's not important where I have been,” she replied, her tone serious as she sought to avoid the subject. “That is all in the past now.”

“Is it?” Masashi lifted an eyebrow, his expression shifting to one of concern. “To be honest, I had assumed you were dead. You were involved in a real messy situation. But don't get me wrong—I am very happy to see you alive,” he said, his smile returning, though it didn't quite reach his eyes.

“Well, all I can say is that the last 20 years have been tough, but I don't really want to go into details, if you don't mind. No offense. I am trying hard to forget the past.”

Masashi nodded, his expression sobering, the lightness of their conversation dimming. “I see. Well, I hope you're not planning on hanging out in Shibuya too much. Some people still hold grudges.”

“No, I'm just visiting. But thanks for the warning,” Sayuri replied, grateful for his concern, yet wishing to keep the conversation away from the shadows of her past.

“Are you living in the countryside?” he inquired, leaning in slightly, genuine interest sparking in his eyes.

“Actually, I no longer live in Japan,” she answered, careful to keep her tone neutral, not wanting to divulge too much.

“Oh! So, you've moved overseas? Probably a wise move.” Masashi lowered his voice to a near-whisper, as if sharing a secret.

“But you know as well as I do, the past has a way of catching up with us. If you ever find yourself in need of a friend—or help...”

Sayuri met his gaze, weighing her options. Although she liked Masashi, trust was a fragile thing for her. Too many people had disappointed her over the years - starting with her father.

“I’ll tell you what,” she said, resolute. “Give me your number, and I’ll keep it in my phone. But don’t expect me to call. Emergencies only.”

“OK. Fair enough,” Masashi agreed, an understanding nod accompanying his words. He reached for a napkin, scribbling his number down with a practiced ease. He slid the napkin across the table to her, a small smile on his lips. Sayuri took the napkin from Masashi, her eyes widening in shock as she noticed the country code. “This is a Thai number,” she said, curiosity piqued.

“Yes. I got promoted. At last,” he chuckled, a hint of pride in his voice.

“What do you mean?” Sayuri asked, her brow furrowing.

“Well, you probably don’t know this, but the Yamaguchi-gumi has been involved in certain smuggling operations in Thailand for the last 70 years.”

“No. I had no idea,” Sayuri answered honestly, her mind sorting through the possibilities.

“You remember Takuya, of course?” Masashi asked, his tone casual yet knowing.

Sayuri almost choked on her coffee at the mention of his name, quickly grabbing some napkins to wipe the spillage. “Yes, I do,” she managed, trying to regain her composure.

“Well, Takuya and I now run the Thailand operation—he is actually my boss—but I’m number two,” Masashi said proudly, a glimmer of ambition in his eyes.

No longer able to maintain her calm, Sayuri exclaimed, “Whaaat!? You’re both based in Thailand?” Her surprise echoed in the café, drawing a few curious glances.

“Yes. Takuya oversees everything, and I oversee the smuggling operations in the north. I spend a lot of time in Laos,” Masashi explained, his demeanour relaxed.

Sayuri's mind raced with questions, but instead, she said, “So, you obviously have Takuya’s number then?”

“Of course. Why? I thought you two had issues,” Masashi queried, leaning forward with interest.

“We sort of do, but we agreed to a truce many years ago,” she replied, her voice steady despite the memories flooding back.

“What, exactly, does a 'truce' mean?” he probed, his curiosity deepening.

“Basically, we agreed to ignore each other,” Sayuri answered, biting her lip. “But if he is in Thailand, maybe it’s time to bury the hatchet, you know? Forgive and forget. Truth and reconciliation. Closure. Whatever you want to call it.”

“So, you’re in Thailand, then?” Masashi asked, tilting his head.

“I travel around a lot—Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand,” she replied truthfully. “But Bangkok is a hub for Southeast Asia, so I go there a few times a year.”

There was no way she would divulge that she was currently living in Nong Pai.

“Well, he seems to be doing a good job at ignoring you, Sayuri. He hasn’t mentioned your name once in my presence. He doesn’t seem to be bitter and twisted like he used to be back in the day.”

“That’s good to know, Masashi. We’re not getting any younger. I think it will be good for both of us to have closure. A clean slate. So, can I have his number, please?” she asked, giving Masashi the sweetest smile she could muster.

“Of course, Sayuri-chan,” he replied, reaching for another napkin. He wrote Takuya’s number down carefully and slid it across the table.

Sayuri took the napkin, her pulse quickening with a mix of anticipation and apprehension. This was a step she hadn’t expected to take today. “Thank you,” she said softly, tucking the napkin into her bag alongside Masashi’s number.

Masashi leaned back, his gaze assessing. “Just be careful, Sayuri. The past can be a tricky thing, and people don’t change overnight.”

“I know,” she replied, her voice steady. “But sometimes, confronting it is the only way to move forward.”

Masashi nodded, a look of understanding passing between them. “You’ve grown up, haven’t you?” he said, a hint of admiration in his voice.

“Life has a way of making you grow up fast,” she replied, a bittersweet smile crossing her lips.

As they continued their conversation, the sun dipped lower in the sky, casting warm light through the café window. Sayuri felt a strange sense of hope stirring within her. Perhaps this unexpected reunion with Masashi was a sign that she could finally start to piece together a future unburdened by the weight of her past.

CHAPTER 33

Sayuri lay on her yoga mat, taking a break from web design. Coding exhausted her brain and she found it necessary to take a break every couple of hours. She was multi-tasking - stretching her aching lower back as she tried to focus on reading a book on her iPhone: *'Why we age, and why we don't have to.'* Yet her mind was a swirl of thoughts. Richard had been texting her less and less, and a sense of unease settled in her chest. She found herself staring at her phone, willing it to light up with a message that never came.

In contrast, her phone buzzed with a message from Ricky, who was thousands of miles away in the USA. His texts always had a way of bringing some residual emotions to the surface, even when they were filled with longing.

Miss you, Sayuri. I love you. I am hoping to come back to Thailand in July.

A smile tugged at her lips, but it was bittersweet. She had not told Ricky about Richard—she had kept that part of her life hidden, choosing to 'play the field', as she liked to call it. She loved Ricky for the philosophical conversations they shared, for the way he understood her on a deeper level. But she also knew he was not the best boyfriend; their relationship had always been tumultuous, filled with highs and lows that left her breathless.

"You're too American," she had once told him.

"What do you mean by that?" he had demanded, hurt by her words.

"Everything upsets you. You don't know how to relax," she had told him truthfully.

Yet with Richard, everything felt calm and steady. She adored his thoughtful nature, the way he carried himself, and, yes, she couldn't deny her attraction to his muscular body. He was everything she thought she needed in a partner. But there was undeniable chemistry with Ricky, an electric connection that sparked whenever they spoke.

Sayuri had thought she had become adept at navigating this emotional landscape, fiercely independent and no longer the woman who relied on a man for anything. She was building a new life in Thailand, and while she missed having a man around, she was hoping not to compromise her newfound independence. But here she was – stuck in an invisible love triangle – with no solution in sight.

She glanced back at her phone, her heart fluttering at Ricky's words. It was tempting to fall back into the rhythm of their relationship, especially with Richard heading back to South Africa to see his family soon. He couldn't guarantee when he would return to Thailand, and that uncertainty gnawed at her. Last week, she had asked Richard about his plans and he had texted back:

John Lennon famously once said: "Life is what happens while you are busy making plans."

It was the same quote Aya had shown her all those years ago. Eerie.

The response had been vague, but she understood the traveller mentality—he was, after all, a free spirit, just like her now. But as she sat alone in her apartment, she felt the weight of her decision looming. Ricky's message echoed in her mind, pulling at her heartstrings. She missed the connection they had shared, the laughter, and the comfort of familiarity.

Taking a deep breath, she decided that she would reach out to Ricky. She would give their relationship another chance. Closure with Richard could wait until he decided to return to Thailand - if ever. She didn't want to be the one left hanging, wondering what could have been while Richard wandered the world. With a sense of resolve, she typed a response to Ricky, her fingers dancing over the screen.

I miss you too, Ricky. What are your plans when you get back to Thailand?

As she hit send, a strange mix of excitement and apprehension washed over her. She was stepping back into a familiar dance with Ricky, one that had its own rhythm and chaos. But she also felt a twinge of guilt for keeping Richard in the dark. Yet, she reminded herself, honesty was a two-way street. For now, she would focus on what was in front of her—a rekindling of an old flame, a chance to explore the connection that had once felt so vital.

Sayuri lay in bed, a thin sheet covering her legs, listening to her favourite podcast, 'Kenko no Tame no Rajio'. The soothing voices filled the room, blending with the gentle whirl of the fans positioned strategically beside her. The oppressive heat of May had finally given way to the relief of the monsoon season, making the nights a bit more bearable. The podcast was suddenly interrupted by the pinging of her iPhone, breaking her reverie. It was a message from Richard, still in the Philippines.

Hi baby. How are you doing? I'm sorry I have not texted much lately. Life is boring here. Nothing to tell you about.

Sayuri took a moment, her heart fluttering at the familiar term of endearment. She typed back quickly:

Hi. No problem.

Can I ask you a question? Richard's message followed almost immediately.

Sure, she replied, feeling a mix of anticipation and tension.

Would it be possible to come and visit you in Nong Pai in the first week of July? I will fly to South Africa via Bangkok. I would love to see you.

Sayuri's heart raced at the unexpected request. She hadn't anticipated this, and a wave of conflict washed over her. She had already told Ricky that they were officially a couple again, despite her reservations about long-distance relationships. She was betting on

Ricky returning to Thailand before Richard, and now this. She took a deep breath, steeling herself for honesty.

Ricky and I are together again.

A long pause followed, and she could almost feel Richard's surprise through the screen. Finally, another message pinged in.

Is he with you in Thailand?

No, he is still in the USA, but we made up.

Oh, OK. I'm sorry. I should have asked before I booked my ticket. I didn't think you would get back with Ricky.

So, you have booked your ticket already? she asked, her heart sinking a little.

Yes. I arrive in Bangkok on the 1st July and leave on the 7th, Richard replied.

Impulsively, Sayuri texted, *OK. Come to Nong Pai. I don't think Ricky will be here before then. If he does fly back to Thailand before then, I will tell him I will meet him in Bangkok.*

Yay! Thank you, baby. I can't wait to see you again.

Sayuri felt a rush of conflicting emotions. She had stopped calling Richard “honey” in her texts since rekindling things with Ricky, and she had almost given up hope of ever seeing Richard again. But now, knowing he would definitely be coming back to Thailand, stirred something deep within her—a nostalgia for the connection they shared.

It was like swapping beer for tea; she had chosen a safer path and chosen to get back with Ricky, but suddenly craved the thrill of what she had set aside. As her heart fluttered with excitement, she decided to respond with a warmth she couldn't fully suppress.

My pleasure, honey. I can't wait to lie in your strong arms again.

As she hit send, a mix of exhilaration and anxiety coursed through her. The prospect of seeing Richard again brought back memories of their time together—his laughter, his embrace, the way he made her feel alive. But she also felt the weight of her decision to be with Ricky, a choice that now seemed more complicated than ever. With thoughts swirling in her mind, Sayuri closed her eyes, allowing the podcast to wash over her once again. She had two weeks to prepare for the emotional whirlwind that awaited her, and she couldn't help but wonder how her heart would navigate this tangled web of feelings. Would she find clarity, or would she become even more entangled in the lives of the two men she cared for? Only time would tell.

CHAPTER 34

The bustling streets of Bangkok thrummed with life as Sayuri sat at a small table on the terrace of a vibrant bar in Khaosan Road district. The sun had begun to set, casting long shadows over the city and creating a warm glow that contrasted with the chaos below. She loved the hustle and bustle of Bangkok, but the sunsets over the Mekong River were magical in comparison.

Sipping nervously on her beer, her mind wandered back to the events that had led her here. Across from her sat Takuya Shigehara, his presence both commanding and relaxed. He was a man shaped by experience, with sharp features and a gaze that seemed to pierce through the chaos of the outside world. Yet, as she studied him, Sayuri was somewhat surprised by how much older he appeared, the years etched into his face like lines on a map of their shared history. Sayuri found it difficult to not stare at the long scar that ran from his cheek to his chin. The sight of it elicited guilty feelings regarding her betrayal of Takuya, all those years ago, but still she found it hard not to fixate on it.

"I appreciate you meeting me, Sayuri," Takuya said, his voice low and smooth, pulling her from her thoughts. He leaned forward, his elbows resting on the table, a posture that conveyed both intimacy and authority. "I know this isn't easy for you."

She nodded, feeling the weight of their past pressing down on her. She had obtained his number from Masashi Yamamoto, the Yamaguchi-gumi associate she had unexpectedly bumped into in Tokyo. Like Masashi, Takuya was a remnant of her past—a reminder of the tangled web she had tried to escape. His connection to her was intertwined with Ken Watanabe, making this meeting even more complicated.

"A long time has passed, Takuya San. I really want to set things right between us. I think it's time," Sayuri said, her gaze flicking to the faded scar on his cheek once again, a lasting reminder of her betrayal. Quickly, she looked away, unable to hold his gaze.

"Yes, a long time has passed. But why did you not have this conversation with me during all those years you worked in Tokyo?" Takuya asked, his tone curious yet firm.

"I was scared, to be honest. When I was involved romantically with Ken Watanabe, I felt untouchable, so I didn't bother. But working in a Yakuza massage parlour meant that, technically, you were my boss—and that scared me," Sayuri explained, her voice trembling slightly as she recalled the vulnerability she had felt.

"You should have talked to me. But, anyway, we're here now. What's done is done," Takuya replied philosophically, his eyes softening a fraction.

"So, are we good?" Sayuri asked, her heart racing with anxiety.

"Sayuri-San—let me put it to you this way. Yes, I was very upset with you for telling Ken that I was a traitor. However, I know it wasn't your fault. Tomoko set you up. You did what you thought was the right thing to do," Takuya said, his voice steady, yet tinged with an underlying current of empathy.

Sayuri felt a wave of relief wash over her. “Thank you for understanding. I’ve carried that guilt for so long,” she confessed, her voice barely above a whisper.

Takuya regarded her for a moment, the weight of unspoken words hanging in the air. “We all make choices, Sayuri. Some lead us down dark paths, but it’s how we navigate back into the light that defines us.”

His words resonated with her, echoing the internal struggle she had faced since leaving that life behind. “I’ve tried to make amends in my own way,” she said, her voice firmer now. “But I wanted to have this conversation to truly set things right.”

Takuya nodded; his expression thoughtful. “You are stronger than you realize. It takes courage to confront the past.”

“Maybe we can start fresh,” she proposed, a tentative smile breaking through her earlier tension.

“I would like that,” Takuya replied, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. “No more shadows between us.”

“Arigoto gozaimasu!” Sayuri thanked him sincerely, feeling a weight lift.

“Kanpai!” Takuya toasted, raising his beer.

“Kanpai!” chorused Sayuri, mirroring him.

Takuya leaned back in his chair, his gaze fixed on Sayuri with an intensity that made her feel slightly uneasy. The vibrant sounds of Bangkok faded into the background as she awaited his next words, a knot of tension forming in her stomach.

“Sayuri, I know I said we can be friends again, but this scar on my face has an account to settle,” he said carefully, his tone measured but charged.

“I don’t understand,” she stammered, panic rising within her. The warmth of their earlier conversation had evaporated, replaced by a chilling realisation.

“I have to look at this scar every day in the mirror, and it is a constant reminder of what a mess you caused by betraying me,” Takuya continued, his voice steady but laced with a palpable bitterness.

The mention of the word “betraying” heightened the tension that Sayuri had thought was banished for good just moments ago. She felt herself tense again, and she fought to maintain her composure.

“Takuya, I—”

“Did Ken ever tell you what he asked me to do to prove my loyalty?” Takuya interrupted, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Sayuri swallowed hard, recalling the whispers that had circulated after the chaos of that day. “I did eventually find out when Shinji Matsumoto took over the massage parlour I was working in.”

“So, you know why what happened that day happened?” Takuya asked, his tone semi-rhetorical, as if he were leading her down a dark path.

“Yes. Ken asked you to teach Shinji a lesson because he believed that Shinji had persuaded his father, the bank Chairman, to embezzle from Ken,” she replied, her voice trembling slightly.

“Correct. We kidnapped him and held him for ransom. Ken was hoping to recover some of his losses, but the bank Chairman, Shinji’s father, refused to pay at first. So, we beat Shinji up a bit. Still nothing. I needed to prove my loyalty to Ken, so I had to find a way to teach Shinji a lesson he would never forget. *Could never forget!*” Takuya’s voice grew more intense, and Sayuri remained silent, feeling the weight of his words.

As she watched him, she noticed the look of regret etched on Takuya’s face as he shared his story, a stark contrast to the confident demeanour he had presented earlier.

“I had just finished cutting Shinji’s Achilles tendons when Ken tracked me down and sent a message that I should release Shinji,” Takuya continued in a monotone voice.

Sayuri’s breath caught in her throat, her mind racing. She was shocked—not so much by the brutality of what Takuya had done, but because she now knew the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle. The events surrounding Shinji’s attack had always felt like a foggy nightmare, but hearing Takuya’s account brought clarity she hadn’t anticipated.

“You didn’t want to hurt him,” she whispered, almost to herself. “You were forced into it.”

Takuya met her gaze, a flicker of something unreadable passing between them.

“In the end, it wasn’t about what I wanted. It was about proving myself to Ken.” He paused, the regret deepening in his eyes. “And now? I’m left with this scar—a reminder of a choice I made, and a betrayal I didn’t initiate.”

Sayuri felt a wave of empathy wash over her. “I never wanted any of this. I didn’t know what would happen. I was just trying to survive.”

Takuya studied her for a moment, his expression softening slightly.

“We’ve all made choices in the name of survival, Sayuri. But it doesn’t erase the consequences.”

She took a deep breath, feeling the weight of their conversation pressing down on her. “What do you want from me, Takuya? Do you want an apology? Do you want me to take responsibility for what I couldn’t control?”

“I want you to do something that will make me feel like you have made amends for betraying me, even if it was an honest mistake,” Takuya said, searching Sayuri’s eyes for any sign of dissent. Sayuri nodded slowly, feeling the gravity of the situation.

“I’ll get to the point,” Takuya said, “I want you to spy on someone,” Takuya’s lips curled into a slight smile, but his eyes remained serious.

“Spy? What do you mean ‘spy’? Who? Where?” asked Sayuri, flustered.

“There’s a member of our operation in Nong Pai who’s suspected of embezzling money. We need someone who speaks Japanese but is an outsider. I haven’t trusted anyone since my father abandoned my mother and I, so I would prefer not to ask anyone in the Nong Pai organisation. You know what they say – ‘as thick as thieves’, allowing himself a small chuckle at the irony.

A chill ran down Sayuri’s spine. She was now regretting telling Takuya on the phone that she was taking the train from Nong Pai to Bangkok to meet him. Memories of the dangerous games played in the underbelly of Tokyo’s criminal world flooded her mind. Takuya continued filling Sayuri in on the logistics of the operation, detailing the intricate web of their drug operations that spanned Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar.

“The Nong Pai Yakuza smuggle chemical precursors for ketamine and crystal meth overland to Van Pak Len, on the border of Laos and Thailand,” he explained, his tone matter-of-fact. “Have you ever heard of a criminal outfit called Zhao Wei TCO?”

“No.”

“He has built his own city in a so-called Special Economic Zone with all the illegal proceeds from his many criminal enterprises and is protected by the Laos government,” Takuya continued.

“I have never heard of him or his organisation,” Sayuri said.

“Well, once the drugs are manufactured, they come back down the Mekong River to Nong Pai, along with some heroin in exchange for the precursor we give to him which he sells to the Shan United Army in Myanmar.”

Sayuri listened intently, struggling to keep her face passive while a whirlpool of emotions swirled in her belly. The weight of her past decisions hung heavily over her, and she wondered if she could ever permanently cut the invisible umbilical cord that tied her to the Yamaguchi-gumi.

“It sounds complicated, but I still don’t understand how I can get myself close to the Nong Pai crew,” she said, perplexed.

Takuya leaned back, studying her with a penetrating gaze. “I’m sure you will figure it out, Sayuri-chan,” he said, a wry smile appearing. “You are stronger than you think. I’ve known that from the first job we did together.”

“The bank Chairman,” she said softly.

“Yes. You’re smart. You’re tough. I have no doubt that you will find a way. I’ll give you all their names and where you can ‘accidentally’ bump into them. The rest is up to you. But I want progress reports. Often. The sooner I deal with this matter, the sooner we can settle our account. Just keep thinking about that.”

Sayuri had never imagined it would come to this, but here she was, entangled in a web of obligation and fear. *Why now?* she thought, wishing that she had let sleeping dogs lie and not contacted Takuya. Sayuri clenched her fists under the table, feeling the tension coil within her. She had tried to leave that life behind, yet the past was relentless in its pursuit.

“And what happens if I refuse?”

Takuya’s expression hardened, the warmth of their previous camaraderie fading.

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t.”

His words hung heavily in the air, thick and suffocating. Sayuri took a deep breath, weighing her options. The thought of diving back into this world was terrifying. Yet, turning her back on the only person who seemed to have her best interests at heart felt equally daunting.

“Let me think about it,” she finally said, her voice steady.

Takuya nodded; his expression unreadable. “I can give you a few days. But remember, time is not on our side. If this person is indeed embezzling, we need to act quickly.”

As he spoke, Sayuri’s mind raced with conflicting thoughts. She wouldn’t be living in Nong Pai forever. She could do this job for Takuya, settle their account, and move on with either Ricky or Richard - finally leaving the underworld behind her – once and for all. She would not allow her desire for a peaceful life to be derailed. Not by Takuya – not by anyone. She *needed* a new path in life - one far removed from the shadows of her past.

“Who is this member you suspect?” she asked, curiosity peeking through her apprehension.

“His name is Kaba,” Takuya replied, leaning in slightly. “He’s been with us for a while, and I thought he was trustworthy. But something doesn’t feel right. If you can get close to him, maybe you’ll uncover what he’s hiding.”

Sayuri felt a wave of nausea wash over her. The risk involved was monumental, but the idea of betrayal was even more unsettling.

“And if I find something?”

“Then we deal with it. If he’s guilty, we’ll make sure he pays for his treachery,” Takuya said, his voice low and resolute.

“Shouldn’t you be the one to deal with him? You’re the leader, after all,” Sayuri challenged, hoping to push him back.

Takuya's gaze hardened. "I can't. I'm too exposed. If I confront him directly without proof, it would raise too many questions."

Sayuri felt the layers of manipulation weighing her down. "And what if I get caught? What if Kaba realizes what I'm doing?"

"Then you know how to handle yourself," Takuya replied, leaning back with an air of confidence. "You've survived worse."

The truth in his words struck a chord. She had survived—barely—but it felt like a lifetime ago. The woman she had become in Thailand was not the same as the one who had navigated the treacherous waters of Tokyo's criminal underbelly. Taking a deep breath, she locked eyes with Takuya once more. "I need to think about this more seriously. I'll let you know my decision soon."

"Fair enough," Takuya said, a hint of respect in his eyes. "Just remember, Sayuri, the stakes are high. Choose wisely."

As he stood to leave, the heaviness of their conversation lingered in the air, tinged with unspoken tension and unresolved history. Sayuri watched him go, her mind racing with the implications of what lay ahead. She felt the familiar pull of her past, a siren call that threatened to drag her back into the depths she had fought so hard to escape. But deep down, she knew she had a choice to make—a choice that could either free her from the shadows or bind her to them forever.

She ordered another Chang, intent on drinking until her brain calmed down to normal speed, preferably slower.

CHAPTER 35

Richard stepped off the train in Nong Pai, the air thick with the scent of street food from the sidecar vendors waiting for the passengers to disembark. As he stretched his legs, the warm sun enveloped him, and he felt a rush of excitement coursing through his veins. As he swung his duffel bag over his shoulder, he heard a familiar voice.

“Hel-loooo!”

He turned to see Sayuri sitting on one of the beautiful hand-carved wooden benches that lined the platform. She wore a yellow and orange polka dot summer dress that danced around her knees, and her hair was neatly tied up in a bun. Her tiny feet were slotted into her favourite sandals, and a bright smile lit up her face.

“Hello baby!” Richard beamed, his heart swelling at the sight of his ‘geisha girl’ once more.

Sayuri stood up and glided toward him, knowing better than to try and help him with his bag. After a quick peck on the lips, she asked, “Did you get any sleep?”

“Not much. I’m very tired. Three days of travel,” he replied, rubbing the back of his neck.

“OK. When we get home, you can relax,” said Sayuri, her eyes sparkling with affection.

“Yes. I think I need to,” Richard agreed, feeling grateful for her concern.

“You take tuk-tuk?” she asked, glancing at the small motorbike that could barely accommodate them and their luggage.

“Yes,” he confirmed, and she smiled fondly at him.

As they made their way to the bustling street outside the station, Sayuri couldn’t help but wonder about the intensity of their relationship. Perhaps the knowledge that they might never see each other again made their experiences together feel more vivid—like a quickie in a pub’s bathroom compared to a lifelong commitment. It was thrilling and terrifying all at once. Once they arrived home, Sayuri was waiting in the lounge, a knowing smile across her pretty face.

“Put bag down. Come,” she ordered immediately, her tone playful yet commanding. Richard obeyed, chuckling at her directness as he followed her to the bathroom.

“Take off clothes,” Sayuri instructed, her eyes glinting with mischief.

“OK,” Richard replied, smiling as he undressed.

Sayuri knew Richard loved having his back washed; he had once told her that, having spent much of his life alone, it felt like a special intimacy. She scooped some cold water from the tub and began soaping his entire body, the coolness a refreshing contrast to the blistering heat outside.

“Bliss,” Richard murmured, leaning into her touch. The bathroom was cool and serene, a sanctuary from the chaos of the outside world. Sayuri focused on the tension in his muscles, her hands skillfully massaging his back as she applied the soap.

“Oh! I think you not have sex in Philippines,” she said, teasingly glancing at his growing arousal.

“No. Nothing,” Richard confirmed, a hint of embarrassment colouring his cheeks, but he couldn’t hide the pleasure in his voice.

Sayuri laughed softly, the sound bright and melodious. “That’s good. You save energy for me,” she replied, her fingers trailing down his sides, eliciting a shiver from him. Richard closed his eyes, surrendering to the sensation as he leaned forward.

“You always know how to make me feel special,” he said, his voice thick with appreciation.

She continued to work her magic, the water glistening on his skin as she moved with practiced grace. “It’s easy when you’re so sexy,” she teased, her tone light but her gaze serious.

Richard opened his eyes, meeting her gaze in the mirror. “I’ve missed you, Sayuri. More than I thought I would,” he admitted, sincerity lacing his words.

Sayuri paused for a moment, her heart swelling at his confession. “Me too,” she whispered, her fingers stilling on his back. “We will have a good week.”

He nodded, understanding the unspoken weight of those words. Their time together was precious and fleeting, and they both felt the urgency to savour every moment.

With a playful grin, Sayuri resumed her soaping, her fingers gliding over his skin as she whispered, “Now, let’s make this a week to remember.”

Sayuri was a woman of the world. She knew the game and the role that she played in it. All men were putty in her hands, and she knew the power that she wielded. Sometimes, when travelling, if she liked someone, she had sex with them. No emotions, no commitments, no complications. Just sex.

She had assumed that Richard was a typical ‘buy sexual’ travelling man – someone who would ‘buy sex’ in whichever country he was in. Growing up in the murky world of a Yakuza ‘massage parlour, she learnt at an early age that all men wanted one thing and that they would do just about anything to get it. She knew that she was sexy and that men found her irresistible. She could afford to be emotionally detached. The world was her oyster.

But Richard was different. Yes, he did lust after her, but he invested emotionally too. She could tell that he genuinely cared for her. That was rare for her. She led Richard, still dripping wet, by the hand, towards the bedroom.

“Lie down,” she commanded.

Sayuri sat on the edge of the bed, allowing Richard to unzip her dress while she slid her panties off. Kicking her clothes away from the bed, she eased herself on top of him. They both knew that, after such a long time apart, that the session would be brief. And it was. Sayuri could see that she had drained the last bit of energy out of him, amongst other things. He lay on his back, naked, looking completely drained and ready for a long slumber. She showered alone, knowing that he would be fast asleep in no time.

“Hun-nee...”

Sayuri sat on the side of the bed, gently coaxing Richard awake. Slowly, he opened his heavy eyelids, and with a soft smile, reached out to brush a stray lock of hair from her face. In that instant, Sayuri felt a surge of certainty—this meeting was no coincidence, but a twist of fate that would change the course of her life forever.

“Hello baby,” Richard greeted sleepily, his voice thick with remnants of dreams.

“I made food. Are you hungry? If you want to sleep more, that is OK,” Sayuri offered, her heart fluttering as he smiled lovingly at her.

Richard glanced at his watch, his eyes widening. “Oh! 2 PM already. Yes, I am hungry. What did you make?”

“Noodles with mushrooms and vegetables,” said Sayuri, pride swelling in her chest.

“*Oishi desu*,” Richard replied, a grin spreading across his face.

“How you know Japanese?” she asked, genuinely impressed.

“I had a lot of free time in the Philippines. You learned English, so I must learn Japanese. We had a deal, remember?” Richard explained, his tone light.

“Yes. Very good,” Sayuri said, beaming at his effort.

As they settled in the lounge, Sayuri served up her signature dish—Japanese-style noodles, perfectly seasoned with soy sauce. They savoured the meal together, the comforting aroma filling the room.

“That was a lot of food,” Richard remarked, placing his empty plate on the coffee table. “I think I will get fat this week,” he joked, turning to Sayuri with a playful glint in his eye.

“You like my cooking?” she asked, her heart-warming at his satisfaction.

“My French side of my family believes that we must 'live to eat—not eat to live.' That is why French cooking is so delicious, Just like your food, baby,” Richard answered, his compliment making Sayuri’s cheeks flush.

“I'm glad you enjoyed it,” she replied, her smile brightening. Cooking for Richard felt like a gift, one that she eagerly embraced. “You have lost weight, I think,” she commented.

“Filipino food is not tasty,” Richard explained.

“Did you drink lots of beer?” Sayuri asked.

“No, I didn’t. They have a really cheap rum-type drink there called Tanduay. I did drink *a lot* of that,” Richard chuckled.

“I think it is better for your stomach,” Sayuri said, gently prodding a finger into Richard’s belly.

“Yes, I agree. I’m still a bit tired from traveling, baby. And my full belly is making me feel lazy, so I think I will go back to bed. Is that OK?” he asked, stifling a yawn.

“Sure,” Sayuri said. “I am going for a walk to Lotus. It is good to walk after eating. Healthy.”

“Ok, baby. See you later. But first, give me a kiss,” he smiled, leaning toward her.

Sayuri obliged, leaning over to let him kiss her softly on the lips. A warmth spread through her, and she felt a pleasant flutter in her chest.

“Sleep well. See you,” she said as Richard got up, stretching his arms overhead before walking back to the bedroom.

As the door clicked shut behind him, Sayuri took a moment to relish the tranquillity of the space. She felt content. But she also felt a sense of anticipation; their time together was fleeting, and she wanted to make the most of it. But there was something she had to do first. With a final glance toward the bedroom, she grabbed her bag and slipped on her sandals, feeling a bit apprehensive about her imminent task.

CHAPTER 36

One of the things Sayuri liked about Nong Pai was that it was small enough to be able to walk anywhere within 20 minutes. She missed the hustle and bustle of Tokyo, but she welcomed this change of pace. She certainly didn't miss the crowded train stations and the wasted hours spent on public transport. As she entered the Asawan shopping centre, she felt a sense of purpose.

She had messaged Takuya upon arriving back in Nong Pai after their Bangkok meeting and told him that she had decided to spy on Kaba for him.

"Good choice," was all he had said.

She had visited a few of the places Takuya had suggested where she could possibly 'bump into' members of the local Yakuza community. Her initial investigations had not been fruitful, failing to see any obvious-looking Japanese men. But today, she was going back to Miyagi, one of the restaurants on Takuya's list. She really needed to make some progress and try and settle the matter for Takuya before Richard arrived back from the Philippines. Sayuri had been reporting back to Takuya every couple of days as ordered and he had sounded frustrated by her initial lack of success. But when she had told him that her next stake out would be at Miyagi, he had perked up.

"Oh yes! Sorry, I forgot to mention that you should start there," Takuya had apologised for his oversight.

According to him, some of his Yakuza associates frequented the Miyagi restaurant and that the co-owner was the son of a Yakuza member from Kobe who had fled Japan to escape a violent past in the 70s. The Yamaguchi-Gumi, with their long-established presence in Nong Pai, had helped him create a new identity and settle down, even providing him with a Thai 'wife' who was more of a 'lady of the night.' Their son, affectionately nicknamed Beef, had taken over the family restaurant, which now served as a front for laundering money. The Yakuza ate for free Takuya had told her.

For the past week, she had intentionally used Miyagi as her preferred base for her afternoon sessions doing online web design work. The WIFI was excellent, the food was delicious and their coffee reasonable. As she entered Miyagi, the familiar scent of fish welcomed her. Beef was at the counter, a smile spreading across his face when he spotted her.

"Sayuri! Welcome back!" he called, wiping his hands on a towel.

"Hi, Beef!" she replied, her spirits lifting. "I'll just have a coffee today."

He nodded, not bothering to present a menu, knowing she was there to work on her laptop. Sayuri settled into her usual spot by the window, pulling out her laptop and connecting to the restaurant's Wi-Fi. The rustic decor and soft chatter of the few patrons made it a comforting place to spend her time. An hour passed, and the restaurant began

to empty. The soothing sounds of clinking dishes and casual conversations faded as the last customers departed. Sayuri took a sip of her cold coffee, glancing around the now-quiet space.

“Beef!” she called, waving him over to her table.

He approached with a curious look. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s great! I’m just getting a little bored in Nong Pai,” she confessed, putting on a mock sad face. “I want to socialize, but I don’t speak any Thai. I was wondering if the Japanese community here ever has any social gatherings that I could attend. You know—like in Japan—drinking all night,” she joked, hoping to lighten the mood.

Beef chuckled, leaning against the table. “You want to drink all night? That’s a good way to make friends! There are a few gatherings, but they’re not always planned. But my father likes to celebrate birthdays and some special Japanese occasions. Tanabata is happening soon. I’m sure he won’t mind if you attend. I’ll check and tell you tomorrow – if you are coming here.”

“That sounds perfect!” Sayuri exclaimed, her eyes lighting up with excitement. “That’s so kind of you, Beef. I’ll make sure to come tomorrow.”

“Or you could give me your number and I can just message you the info,” Beef offered.

Sayuri was not prepared to give her number to anyone. She knew from experience that trust was not to be given lightly and she hardly knew Beef, so she said, “No, it’s OK Beef. I’ll be here tomorrow,” she said as she closed her laptop and put it into her rucksack. “Thank you for being so helpful. I must go. See you tomorrow,” she said, leaving 100 baht on the table.

“Keep the change,” she smiled, as she departed.

“Before you go,” Beef said, his expression shifting to one of seriousness. “I don’t mind trying to help you with your social life, but I must warn you – you must be careful, Sayuri. Some of the people my family know are connected to the Yakuza. It’s best to keep a low profile.”

Sayuri nodded, feeling the weight of his warning. “I get it. I’ll be cautious. Thank you, Beef. You’re always looking out for me.”

“Of course! You’re a friend,” he replied, giving her a warm smile. “And if you ever need anything, just let me know.”

As he walked away, Sayuri felt a mixture of gratitude and apprehension. The thought of mingling with others in the Japanese community thrilled her, but the underlying risks of her current situation loomed large. She took a deep breath, reminding herself that she was ready to embrace whatever came next, no matter how complicated it might be. The

sooner she gathered information for Takuya, the sooner she could square their 'account'. That would be a huge relief.

Richard awoke in darkness, the soft hum of the night surrounding him. He shifted slightly and felt the warmth of Sayuri spooning against him, her breath gentle and rhythmic. A smile crept across his face as he took in the moment, but soon the call of nature urged him to slip out of bed. Carefully, he pried her arms from around him, trying not to disturb her peaceful slumber. After relieving himself, he returned to the bedroom, the soft glow of the moonlight filtering through the curtains. As he slipped back under the covers, he was startled when Sayuri placed a hand on his chest.

"Are you awake, baby?" Richard whispered, his voice barely above a murmur.

"Yes. How are you feeling? Still tired?" she asked, her voice soft but clear.

"No, I'm feeling good now. But I am happy to lie here with you," he replied warmly, savouring the closeness.

"OK," Sayuri murmured, her tone more of a gentle acceptance than a response. She was not a big talker, preferring to let her actions speak for her. Rolling onto his side to face her, Richard felt her small hands begin to caress his back rhythmically, sending a soothing warmth through him.

"Oh! Your lump is gone," Sayuri exclaimed suddenly, her voice brightening as she became fully awake.

"I thought you had already noticed," Richard said.

"I had forgotten about it," she confessed.

"Yes. I had it removed. It was a sebaceous cyst," Richard explained, feeling a mix of pride and relief.

"What is that?" Sayuri queried, her brow furrowing in curiosity.

"Ha-ha! I don't know in Japanese. But I do know the word for doctor is *isha*," Richard chuckled, enjoying the playful exchange.

Sayuri grabbed her phone from under her pillow, tapping the screen as she searched for the translation. "*Noho*," she announced with a triumphant smile.

"So, you understand?" Richard asked, intrigued.

"Yes. Was it sore?" she sympathised, her eyes filled with concern.

"It was the most painful operation I have ever had. The stupid doctor never gave me enough injections. I could feel everything," he replied, shaking his head at the memory.

Without hesitation, Sayuri leaned across and gently kissed the scar on his spine. “Better now?”

“Yes, thank you, baby,” Richard replied, turning to face her. He snuggled closer, inhaling the sweet scent of her hair, and kissed her neck softly before nibbling her earlobe, eliciting a soft giggle from her.

“I think you have energy now,” she said playfully, her voice laced with mischief.

One thing led to another, and soon they were lost in each other, the bed creaking beneath them as they explored the depths of their connection. The world outside faded away, leaving only the warmth of their bodies and the rhythm of their breaths.

After a quick shower, they lay side by side on their backs, fingers intertwined, basking in the afterglow. The air was thick with the remnants of passion, yet a comfortable silence enveloped them. Richard turned his head slightly to glance at Sayuri, her eyes sparkling in the dim light.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked softly.

“I was just thinking how nice this is,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “But I also feel... confused. I want to enjoy this, but part of me wants to keep my walls up.”

Richard nodded, understanding the paradox that relationships often presented. “It’s okay to feel that way. We don’t have to rush into anything. Let’s just enjoy our time together.”

Sayuri smiled, the tension in her shoulders easing. “Yes, let’s do that,” she agreed, her heart swelling with a mix of hope and apprehension. They lay there, fingers still intertwined, feeling the warmth of each other’s presence, both aware that this moment might be the beginning of something deeper—an adventure neither of them could fully comprehend yet, but one they were both willing to embrace.

Sayuri suddenly felt the need to move to another level of honesty.

“Ricky is not coming to Thailand,” Sayuri blurted out unexpectedly, her voice breaking the comfortable silence that had settled between them.

“Oh really?” Richard asked, intrigued, sitting up a little straighter.

“Leally,” she said cutely, her big eyes sparkling with a mix of relief and uncertainty.

One of the reasons she had felt a strong connection to Ricky was the fact that his travelling modus operandi was similar to hers – impulsive, with no real plan. But now that she was creating a strong bond with Richard, she no longer felt the need to put up with Ricky’s constantly changing itinerary. When he had messaged her recently to inform her of his delay in returning to Thailand, she had told him that she was no longer

prepared to wait and had reminded him that she had warned him of this possibility before his departure to the USA to look after his sick father.

Richard felt a wave of curiosity wash over him, but he thought it best not to pry too deeply. "So, you will be staying here by yourself?" he probed gently.

"Yes," Sayuri replied, her tone suggesting that this was both a choice and a burden.

"So, if I come back to Thailand, can I come live with you?" Richard asked, hopeful, his spirits lifting at the thought.

"Sure," affirmed Sayuri, a smile spreading across her face.

Richard's expression lit up, but beneath it, Sayuri sensed the tension of their unspoken feelings. She suspected he knew that she had strong feelings for both Ricky and himself, caught in a virtual love triangle he had inadvertently become a part of.

"OK. Thanks. The way I look at it—this is your house now. You are the boss. I don't know when I will be back, but it will probably be in August," Richard continued, his tone casual.

"August?" Sayuri asked, tilting her head slightly, not having mastered the months of the year in English yet.

"*Hachigatsu*," Richard translated to Japanese, smiling at her.

"You study a lot of Japanese," Sayuri stated, genuinely impressed by Richard's commitment to learning her language.

"Hai" agreed Richard, causing Sayuri to laugh, the sound bright and infectious.

"What is so funny?" Richard asked, smiling but confused by her reaction.

"You say it too slowly. It is like a karate chop—Hai!" Sayuri explained, demonstrating with a swift motion of her hand.

"Hai!" Richard replied, mimicking her with exaggerated enthusiasm.

"HAI!" she repeated forcefully, as if she were karate chopping a plank of wood. "Quicker and louder," she instructed, her eyes gleaming with mischief.

"HAI!" Richard shouted, the room echoing with his enthusiasm.

"Good!" Sayuri beamed, pride radiating from her like sunlight.

"Thank you, dear. You are a good teacher," Richard said, chuckling at the unexpected lesson in martial arts enthusiasm.

"OK. You come back *hachigatsu*?" Sayuri asked again, wanting to confirm what Richard had said.

“I think so,” Richard replied, his voice steady, but the uncertainty of the future lingered in his eyes.

“No problem,” Sayuri replied, her smile brightening. But inside, she felt a swirl of emotions—hope, confusion, and the thrill of possibility.

They shared a moment of comfortable silence, each lost in their thoughts. Sayuri was conflicted about their next encounter. She couldn't shake the feeling that their paths were more complicated than ever. With so many unspoken words and unacknowledged feelings, she felt that the delicate balance of their relationship could tip either way.

The next five days flew by in a whirlwind of laughter, cooking, late-night conversations and intimacy. Sayuri and Richard found a rhythm together, a comfortable routine that involved sex, eating, and the occasional binge-watching session on Netflix. The warmth of their connection wrapped around them like a cozy blanket, but beneath the surface, Sayuri's internal struggle simmered.

She was health-conscious, a trait that had been ingrained in her since childhood. Yet, like everyone else, she had her moments of weakness. Drinking was a significant part of Japanese culture, and while she tried to limit her beer intake, giving it up completely felt impossible. Each night she enjoyed a few cold ones, but with each sip came a tide of guilt that washed over her afterward. It was a vicious cycle—she would indulge, feel guilty, then spiral into a bout of depression, only to drink again to escape those feelings. The weight of her internal battle felt heavy, and she often considered it a sign of weakness, an un-Japanese flaw.

Richard never commented on her drinking, which was both a relief and a source of anxiety for Sayuri. She often felt guilty about her lack of willpower. When they were together, she limited herself to three or four beers, but when alone, she could easily go all night. The thought of becoming like her father, troubled her. She felt like a hypocrite.

One evening, as they sprawled on the couch, watching Netflix, Richard broke the silence. “It’s rare to find a woman who can drink beer like a man,” he said, his eyes glued to the screen.

“Rare? What is rare?” Sayuri quizzed, her curiosity piqued.

Richard took a moment, searching for the right word. “Unusual. Do you know that word?” he asked, glancing at her.

“Hai!” she replied, a playful smile spreading across her face, the word now a standing joke between them.

“I am jealous that you don’t put on weight from drinking beer. For me, it’s a case of ‘from the lips to the hips,’” Richard lamented dramatically, placing a hand on his stomach.

“Yes, you are getting fat,” Sayuri stated bluntly and matter-of-factly, her tone completely serious.

Richard chuckled, taken aback by her honesty. “Wow, straight to the point, huh? Didn’t you say I looked thinner a few days ago,” he quizzed.

“I think I am bad for you,” Sayuri said playfully. “You drink too much beer with me. I think you must but Tanduay,” she teased.

“I would – if they had it in Thailand. One big beer in Thailand costs the same as a bottle of Tanduay in the Philippines,” Richard commented.

“Well, you have become more fat in one week,” she reinforced, noting the discomfort in Richard’s eyes at her bluntness.

“Ouch!” he said, giving her a sad look.

Sayuri shrugged, a small smile creeping onto her lips. She had long ago learned that being straightforward was the best way for her. It saved her from weaving a web of lies that only led to complications later. Plus, she had grown tired of the indirect communication that marked her upbringing. The Japanese of her parents' era often sidestepped issues with a complicated blend of tradition and diplomacy, creating a stifling and confusing atmosphere. In contrast, Sayuri felt that her directness was a form of rebellion—a way to carve out her authentic self in a world that often pressured people into conformity.

“Why do people have to lie?” she said rhetorically, her voice steady. “It’s better to say what you think.”

Richard nodded, impressed by her conviction. “I admire that about you, really. It’s refreshing. The truth hurts, but I agree with you – a person should say what is on their mind.”

“Thank you,” she replied, a hint of pride in her voice. “I want to be myself, not just another robot bowing to tradition.”

Sayuri felt a pang of guilt again but pushed it aside, focusing instead on the warmth of Richard beside her. In this space, she could be open, and perhaps that was the first step in breaking free from the cycle she found herself in.

“Let’s drink to being ourselves,” Richard suggested, raising an imaginary glass.

“Kanpai!” Sayuri laughed, clinking her imaginary drink against his. She knew that every night would be a balance of enjoyment and her internal struggles, but for now, they could simply enjoy each other’s company, creating memories that felt both liberating and true.

On Richard's last day in Nong Pai before flying to South Africa, he found a quiet moment to lie down next to Sayuri on the yoga mat that had become her sanctuary. The mat was slightly worn, a testament to the hours she spent stretching and trying to ease the

tension in her lower back. Despite her dedication to web design and the spirit of Gaman, the long hours hunched over her laptop that day had taken their toll.

Richard settled beside her, lying on his back, soaking in the peaceful atmosphere. He loved listening to the birds tweeting in the many trees around Jolene's house. There was one in particular that sounded very human. He had searched online for audio files of bird calls in the Nong Pai region, but had found nothing even remotely similar. After a few moments, Sayuri stopped her stretches and lay down next to him, resting her head on his chest.

"I miss Ricky," she confessed, her voice barely above a whisper.

The admission caught Richard off guard, and he didn't know how to react. He stayed silent, hoping she would elaborate.

"He's a terrible boyfriend, but I think he is my soulmate," Sayuri continued, her tone reflective.

"What makes you say that?" Richard asked, curious despite himself.

"I think we want the same things in life. We are moving in the same direction together," she replied, her gaze fixed on the ceiling, lost in thought.

Richard frowned, feeling a knot tighten in his stomach. He had no idea what that meant, but he really didn't want to delve into her relationship with Ricky. "OK," he said simply, trying to keep his voice steady. They lay in silence for a few minutes, the weight of unsaid words hanging between them. Then, unable to contain his curiosity, Richard blurted out, "Is he good in bed?"

Sayuri laughed, a bright sound that cut through the tension. "Noooo! But I like being with him. We talk a lot. He understands me."

"OK. That's good," Richard said, though he felt a pang of disappointment at hearing her truth.

"Are you jealous?" Sayuri asked, turning her head to look at him, her expression playful yet probing.

"To tell you the truth, baby, I have not thought about Ricky until you mentioned him. But now, all I can do is think about him. My brain tells me that I can't be jealous because I don't own you, and I am leaving again. But my heart is jealous," he admitted, frustration creeping into his voice.

Sayuri felt a rush of emotions at his words. She was still undecided about which of the two men she preferred. They each had their own endearing qualities, and she relished the attention from both. But deep down, she knew she couldn't play games with their feelings; she had to choose whose heart to break. She had deliberately brought up the subject of Ricky to gauge Richard's reaction. He was leaving soon, and she had received a message from Ricky announcing his return to Thailand in a couple of months. Timing was everything, and the thought weighed heavily on her.

“Where is Ricky now?” Richard asked.

“He is in America,” Sayuri replied honestly.

“Do you talk a lot?”

“Yes.”

“Is he coming back to Thailand?”

“Yes.”

“OK. I’m leaving tomorrow. If he comes to live with you in Nong Pai then I won’t come back. I’m only coming back to be with you. I like you,” clarified Richard.

“I like you too,” Sayuri said solemnly, squeezing his hand.

As she lay there, she reconciled her feelings for Ricky by reminding herself of the six months they had spent living together and the established relationship they shared. Richard, on the other hand, was sexy, thoughtful, and loving, but this was only their second week together. They were still in the honeymoon phase, and she didn’t want to rush into a decision that could change everything.

“Sayuri,” Richard’s voice broke through her thoughts, pulling her back into the moment. “I know this is complicated, but I want you to be happy, no matter what that looks like.”

She turned to face him fully, searching his eyes for sincerity. “I appreciate that, Richard. It means a lot to me.”

He smiled softly, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “Just promise me one thing—don’t rush into anything. Take your time to figure things out.”

Sayuri nodded, feeling the weight of his words. She knew she had decisions to make, but for now, lying there with him, she allowed herself to breathe, if only for a moment. The world outside could wait; in this space, she could simply be with Richard, enjoying the fleeting moments they had left together.

CHAPTER 37

It was a humid evening, and Sayuri could feel her dress clinging to her uncomfortably as she walked to Asawan Centre in Nong Pai, her heart fluttering with anticipation. She had been invited to a *Tanabata* gathering at Beef's family home, a special occasion that felt like a delightful escape from her routine.

As she entered Miyagi restaurant, she was greeted by the familiar aroma of grilled meats and the sound of laughter. Beef was behind the counter, his half-Thai, half-Japanese heritage evident in his warm smile and easy demeanour. He spotted her and waved, motioning her over.

"Hey, Sayuri! Ready for tonight?" he asked, wiping his hands on his apron.

"Hai! Thank you for inviting me," she replied, smiling, concealing her uneasiness. The butterflies in her stomach were making it difficult to maintain her normally calm composure. Memories of the last time she had spied for the Yakuza still lingered, a harsh reminder of how badly things could go wrong – and the reason she had now gone full circle – once again spying for the Yamaguchi-Gumi. Only, this time, it was even more dangerous.

Beef locked the restaurant doors early, ensuring everything was secure. "Let's go. I'll drive you to my place," he said, grabbing his keys. As they stepped outside, the warm evening air wrapped around them, and Sayuri felt that she might never truly manage to sever her ties to the Yakuza. *It can only end badly*, she thought, as she got into the car.

The car ride was filled with light conversation, the sound of *The Scorpions* playing in the background as they drove along the riverfront. Sayuri glanced out the window, taking in the scenery—the lush greenery, the distant sounds of animated chatter from the street vendors, and the shimmering water reflecting the hues of sunset. Nong Pai had some of the most amazing sunsets she had ever seen, and she had made a habit of going for a walk along the promenade just before sunset. It soothed her spirit.

When they arrived at Beef's house, the atmosphere was lively. Festival lights hung from the trees, casting a soft glow, and the air was filled with the tantalizing scent of grilled food. A small group had already gathered, a mix of family and friends, their laughter blending with traditional Japanese music playing softly in the background. Beef parked the car, and they stepped out.

"Welcome to my home," he said, leading her toward the entrance. The house was a beautiful blend of Thai and Japanese architecture, with wooden beams and sliding doors that opened up to a stunning view of the Mekong across the huge front lawn. Inside, the gathering was already in full swing.

Beef's parents arrived to greet Sayuri, both dressed in beautiful *yukatas* adorned with pastel floral motifs. His father wore a striking red obi around his waist and traditional geta sandals, a *tenugi* draped casually over his shoulder. He stood tall and composed, his traditional attire radiating a quiet pride in his heritage. The gentle wrinkles on his face

spoke of wisdom and life experiences, while his twinkling eyes reflected joy and appreciation for the lively atmosphere around them.

His mother moved with grace and poise, her demeanour exuding confidence. Each of her movements was deliberate and gentle, perfectly complementing the elegance of her attire. Soft makeup enhanced her natural beauty, and her hair was styled in a traditional way, adorned with decorative *kanzashi* hairpins, showcasing her meticulous attention to detail. Together, they embodied a harmonious blend of tradition and warmth, making Sayuri feel instantly welcomed.

“Yokoso! Seki, Masaru, desu!” Beef’s father introduced himself to Sayuri.

“My name is Somjai. I’m sorry, I don’t speak much Japanese,” Beef’s mother introduced herself in English.

“Sato, Sayuri, desu!” lied Sayuri, using her grandmother’s maiden name – not wanting to risk being linked to the Yakuza. She felt reasonably safe from exposure here in Thailand. She could not see how this overseas-based section of the Yamaguchi-Gumi could know that she was linked to the Tokyo clan. They offered her a drink—a mix of fruit juice and something stronger, which she accepted with a smile, but did not intend to drink. She preferred beer.

As the evening progressed, she found herself engrossed in conversations about the significance of *Tanabata*, the legends surrounding it, and the various ways people celebrated across Japan and Thailand. She listened intently, enjoying the stories shared by Beef’s family, who spoke with a mix of pride and nostalgia.

“Sayuri-San,” Masaru said, trying to get her attention.

“Ojiisan,” acknowledged Sayuri, turning to face him as they all mingled in the garden, drinks in hand.

“Did your parents ever teach you about the significance of the *Tanabata* Festival?”

“Is it something to do with stars?” Sayuri feigned ignorance. She loved Japanese festivals and knew more than most about them, but did not want to appear arrogant.

“Yes, that is correct,” said Masaru, putting his arm around her shoulder and guiding her away from the crowd. “If you look up there where the Milky Way is...” he started, pointing into the clear night sky, unpolluted by light, as Sayuri thought back to Tokyo’s bright lights. After he explained to her about how the Star Festival celebrates the meeting of two stars, Orihime (the Weaver Princess) and Hikoboshi (the Cowherd), who are separated by the Milky Way and allowed to meet only once a year on the seventh day of the seventh month, Sayuri managed to excuse herself.

I wonder if Kaba is here, she thought, as she politely navigated her way through the garden, avoiding getting sucked into conversations. She had a job to do, and this was a golden opportunity to make headway on the task Takuya had set for her. She was not built to be a spy. She lacked the social skills needed to strike up conversations with

random people. She really had no idea how to find Kaba or what she would even do if she ever met him. *Gaman*, she told herself. *You can do this. You have to do this!*

When it was time to hang the *tanzaku*, colourful strips of paper filled with wishes, Sayuri joined the group outside. The lanterns illuminated the garden, creating a magical atmosphere. She took a *tanzaku* and wrote her wish—something simple but heartfelt:

For happiness and connection, wherever life takes me.

As she hung her wish on a bamboo branch, she felt a strange sense of belonging wash over her. The laughter, the shared stories, and the camaraderie felt like a warm embrace, and for a moment, she forgot about the complexities of her life.

There was still no sign of Kaba though. Part of her was relieved, but she knew there was no way to avoid doing the task Takuya had asked her to do. There had been a brief moment when she had considered running away – maybe going to Laos or Cambodia – but kicking the can down the road would just compound the problem.

Later in the evening, as the stars twinkled above, Beef approached her with a plate of grilled skewers. “How are you enjoying the night?” he asked, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

“It’s wonderful! Thank you for including me. I feel so lucky to be here,” Sayuri replied, her heart swelling with gratitude.

Beef smiled, clearly pleased. “You’re part of the family now. And besides, it’s nice to have someone to share this with. There are very few Japanese here in Nong Pai. You are a welcome addition to our small community. *Kanpai!*”

“*Kanpai!*” Sayuri toasted with the Chang beer she had found in what was apparently the ‘beer fridge’ in the kitchen, which was full of Chang, Leo and Asahi. As the night wore on, the group shared stories and laughter, the atmosphere becoming increasingly festive. Despite enjoying the free ice-cold beer and warm conversation, she was feeling a bit lonely.

It’s funny how you can be surrounded by people and still feel all alone, she mused, wondering if it was time to go home. She was about to go say her farewells to Beef’s family when she noticed three Japanese men being let into the front entrance by Beef.

Suddenly alert, she quickly went to grab another Chang for ‘Dutch courage’ and went back into the front garden. Giving it a quick scan, her eyes settled on the three Japanese men standing together at the far end, their casual postures suggesting they were enjoying the evening. She couldn’t tell if Kaba was among them, but she knew exactly how to find out.

With a mischievous smile, she straightened her posture and took a deep swig from her beer, letting the cool liquid warm her confidence. As she approached, she feigned a wobble, her foot purposely catching on an uneven stepping-stone. With a dramatic flourish, she stumbled forward, nearly losing her balance.

“Whoa!” she exclaimed, gasping for effect as she tilted dangerously.

The three men turned in unison, instincts kicking in at the sight of a beautiful woman in distress. “Are you okay?” one of them asked, stepping forward with concern etched on his face.

Sayuri flashed a playful grin, feigning embarrassment as she steadied herself with a hand on the nearest man’s arm. “I’m fine! Just a little tipsy, I guess,” she said, her voice sweet and teasing.

“Here, let me help you,” another man offered, his eyes wide with eagerness as he reached out.

“Oh, thank you!” Sayuri replied, leaning slightly closer, her demeanour flirtatious. She could sense their interest, the way they leaned in, eager to assist.

With each passing moment, she felt the thrill of the game—her years of experience in massage parlours had honed her skills in teasing men like this. She took a step back, pretending to regain her composure, her laughter light and inviting.

“Do you guys come here often?” she asked, tilting her head playfully, trying to gauge their reactions—and hopefully, Kaba’s identity among them.

When the time came to leave, she felt a bittersweet twinge. “I’ll get a tuk-tuk home,” she assured Beef, who offered to drive her, but she preferred to soak in the stillness of the night.

“Be safe, Sayuri. I’ll see you at Miyagi soon?” he asked, a hint of hope in his voice.

“Definitely,” she replied, her smile genuine.

As she walked toward the road, the sounds of the gathering faded into the background, leaving her with a sense of accomplishment. She knew that there were no taxis in Nong Pai – it was too small – but tuk-tuks were plentiful and easy to find. She hailed a tuk-tuk, the driver smiling as he helped her into the back. As they drove through the quiet streets of Nong Pai, Sayuri looked out at the shimmering river, feeling grateful for this twist of fate that had brought her one step closer to completing her task.

CHAPTER 38

Sayuri lay tummy down on her yoga mat, taking a much-needed break from her laptop. It has been a week since Richard had left for South Africa and she was no closer to deciding whether she was going to choose him over Ricky, or not.

As she alternated bringing her knees as close to her hips as possible, she found herself reminiscing about the past. It seemed odd to her that here she was, nearing 50, never having had a proper long-term relationship. Yes, she had been involved with Ken for 3 years, but they had never lived together – him being married and all. Those 3 years had changed her life in ways she would never have imagined and her mind drifted back to a pivotal moment in her life - that fateful Monday that Ken Watanabe had summoned her to his office to address the Takuya situation.

The tension in the air had been thick, making her feel as if the ground beneath her was crumbling. When Ken finally declared his belief in Takuya's innocence, relief surged through her like a wave.

"I can't believe it," she said, her voice quaking. In that moment, she nearly collapsed, and Ken's strong arms caught her, pulling her close. A smile crossed her face as she remembered how, overwhelmed with gratitude, she had pressed her head against his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

"Thank you, Ken. I didn't want this to end badly."

He had cupped her face gently, his gaze intense and searching. "You mean too much to me for that," he had replied softly, leaning down to kiss her passionately. That kiss ignited a spark within her, blossoming into a complex romantic relationship despite the challenges they faced.

Now, as she lay stretching, a warmth enveloped her as she recalled that memory. Although Ken was married, he had carved out a space for her in his life, allowing her to stay in one of his bachelor pads in Shibuya. She remembered how the light used to filter through the curtains, casting a soft glow as they shared whispered secrets and dreams.

During their first year together, Masashi Yamamoto was the *shatei* in Shibuya in charge of overseeing drug distribution for the Yamaguchi-Gumi clan. Sayuri often found herself alone in nightclubs, watching Ken conduct business deals in the VIP section, the atmosphere thick with money and power.

One night, while Ken was preoccupied, she found herself at the bar with Masashi. Their conversation flowed easily, and she felt a camaraderie with him, a shared understanding of their world. Then, emboldened by the alcohol, she leaned in closer.

"Hey, Masashi," she said, her words slightly slurred. "Can you get me some marijuana?"

Masashi hesitated, concern crossing his face. “You know Ken wouldn’t like it if I gave you that,” he replied seriously.

Annoyance flared within her. “Come on, I just want to relax.”

After weighing his options, he left a joint on the bar, walking away with a hint of a smile. “Just don’t let him find out.”

She chuckled softly at the memory of their laughter, those nights with Ken a whirlwind of excitement and anxiety, yet filled with a sense of belonging. But as her thoughts turned back to the present, a shadow loomed over her happiness. The Yamaguchi-Gumi’s world was unforgiving, and she felt the weight of her choices pressing down on her. She had made her bed in this life, but at what cost? Closing her eyes, she let herself drift back to those memories, clinging to the warmth of Ken’s embrace and the promise of their stolen moments together. It was a bittersweet memory. Their love had felt so vibrant and real. *What has changed in last 30 years? My love life is more complicated than ever and the future is still uncertain.*

Her heart sank as she recalled how her casual marijuana habit had slowly poisoned their bond. What once was a way to unwind had transformed her into someone unrecognizable, a version of herself that Ken described as a stranger—a person he could barely recognize. His words had cut deep, and she could still hear the disappointment in his voice.

“Sayuri, I can’t do this anymore,” Ken had said one evening, sadness and frustration etched on his face. “You’re not the person I fell in love with. When you’re high, it’s like you’re someone else.”

That conversation marked a turning point; everything changed in that moment. The memory flickered like a film reel, and she felt the familiar ache of loss wash over her. After three tumultuous years, Ken had finally told her he no longer wanted to be with her.

“I’ll give you a job if you want,” he added, as if throwing her a lifeline. But the words felt more like a dismissal than a solution.

Sayuri remembered the crushing weight of despair that settled in her chest. “A job? Doing what?” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

“In one of my massage parlours in Shibuya,” Ken replied, his gaze steady yet distant. “You know the kind of place it is. You don’t have to do any extras if you don’t want to.”

The implications of his offer crashed over her like a tidal wave. She had sometimes accompanied Ken on his frequent visits to oversee those parlours, witnessing transactions that blurred the lines of legality and morality. The thought of working there, of immersing herself in that world, made her stomach churn. How could he suggest this after everything they had shared?

“Ken, is this really what you want for me?” she asked, her heart racing as she searched his face for any sign of emotion.

He looked away, the distance between them palpable. “It’s just a job, Sayuri. You need to support yourself.”

His words felt like a knife twisting in her gut. She knew she had to support her family—her mother, Yoko, was struggling since her father had given up on life. Not only had her father lost his job due to drinking, he had given up looking for work and spiralled quickly downhill, becoming an unemployed drunk, living off his mistress.

The burden of his unpaid alimony payments weighed heavily on Sayuri. She had been the one who had finally persuaded her mother to divorce her father – convinced that it was the right thing for her to do. The divorce had been granted swiftly, Sayuri having produced photographic evidence that damned her father beyond a shadow of a doubt.

She remembered feeling trapped. The more her father spiralled down into the pits of hell, the more regret she had felt at pushing her mother to divorce him. It certainly had not gone according to her plan, and she suspected that was the main reason she never made concrete plans – for fear of being disappointed when it all went pear-shaped.

She could vividly recall that moment of despair, when she had nodded, tears brimming in her eyes, and said reluctantly, “Okay, I’ll do it,” fully aware of the path she was choosing. Her guilt over her parents’ divorce was stronger than her desire to be free from further association with Ken and the Yakuza underworld. The reality of her life felt suffocating. She had traded freedom for survival and the bitterness of that choice gnawed at her insides.

As she bent forward, reaching for her toes, the weight of nostalgia pressed down on her. The more she thought about Ken and her days working in one of his massage parlours, the deeper her melancholy ran. The laughter they shared, the dreams they had built together—it all felt so distant now, replaced by regret. She sighed, the stretch no longer bringing her the relief she sought.

Just then, her phone buzzed, pulling her from her thoughts. A message notification from LINE lit up the screen. It was Richard.

Konichiwa.

Konichiwa. How are you? typed Sayuri, ecstatically.

Fine, thank you. And you? came Richard’s reply.

The house is too big without you, texted Sayuri honestly.

She could almost feel the warmth in his words, and it made her smile despite the heaviness in her heart.

I understand. I want to come back to Nong Pai soon, but I don’t want to get there and Ricky is there, probed Richard.

A small flutter of relief washed over her.

Ricky has not messaged me for a long time. He will not be here. You can come.

Sayuri sensed Richard's excitement. Her own spirits lifted at the thought of living with Richard once more. Deep down, she knew it would not be a fairytale ending, but at least they could now prolong the relationship, at least for a while. They had spent only two separate weeks together, but she now thought of Jolene's house as 'their' house. The idea of Ricky being there after her intimate moments with Richard felt oddly awkward, and she was grateful for the assurance that he wouldn't be around.

Yay! That is good news. I will book a ticket today and send the details, came Richard's response.

OK. I look forward to seeing you again, she replied with a smiley face.

Me too. Enjoy your day. Chat to you later. See you.

OK. See you, replied Sayuri with a heart.

As she put her phone down, a smile spread across her face. The clouds of her earlier melancholy began to dissipate, replaced by the warmth of anticipation. The prospect of Richard's return ignited a spark in her heart, reminding her that sometimes, new beginnings could emerge from the shadows of the past.

There was no question that Richard was in love with her. Normally, his text messages were peppered with heart emojis, but this time, she sensed he was caught off guard by the good news. She imagined him doing a little dance for joy, thousands of miles away in South Africa, and it brought a smile to her face.

Ricky's silence over the past week had made her decision easier. With each day that passed without a message from him, it felt more and more settled in her heart. Richard would be back to stay with her, and Ricky would either have to wait his turn or simply give up on her. Sayuri understood that it was entirely possible to love more than one person at the same time, but the thought of the three of them living together was simply unworkable. A choice had been made for her, and she felt a wave of relief wash over her. It saved her from the painful task of breaking someone's heart. Ricky had dropped the ball; Richard had picked it up. Simple.

She re-read the messages from Richard, a cocoon of warmth enveloping her, filling her with overwhelming happiness. The weight of uncertainty and worry that had been plaguing her lifted from her shoulders, replaced by an immense sense of relief and elation. In that moment, everything seemed to fall into place, and the world around her glowed with newfound brightness. Richard's text had filled her heart with a profound sense of joy and contentment.

Feeling the surge of excitement, she had to do something—she was too energized to continue stretching. She got up, slung her backpack over her shoulder, and set off for a walk to Miyagi.

I must sort this Kaba issue out before Richard returns, she decided, her mind racing with thoughts of how to address her tangled feelings. As she approached Asawan Centre, her LINE app pinged again, drawing her attention. It was a message from Richard.

Hi baby. I have my ticket. I arrive in Bangkok on the 8th August. One night in Bangkok. Overnight train to Nong Pai. Arrive 8am on the 10th.

Yay! Sayuri quickly replied, adding a heart emoji.

Yay! Talk soon. See you, replied Richard, also with a heart emoji.

See you.

It was official—Richard was coming back to Thailand to live with her. A giddy thrill coursed through her as she walked, her mind churning with anticipation and plans. The excitement of his return blended with the knowledge of her need to resolve the Kaba issue in the next 3 weeks, if possible. She felt a newfound determination to uncomplicate her life before Richard returned.

CHAPTER 39

Sayuri settled into her usual spot at Miyagi, the familiar sounds of the restaurant providing a comforting backdrop as she worked on her web design project. Though the task was not urgent, it kept her hands busy while her mind wandered to the events of the past week.

She'd met three Japanese guys at the *Tanabata* Festival at Beef's house—Toru, Noboru, and Kazuhiro—and her playful flirtation had led to an invitation to a party. She had played it cool, refusing to give her number to Toru but accepting his instead, telling him she would see how she felt on the day of the party. The urgency to get close to Kaba was ever-present, and she couldn't afford to show too much interest too soon.

A couple of hours into her visit, she noticed a small group of unfamiliar Japanese men sitting in a booth across the restaurant. They were laughing, their animated gestures suggesting a mix of camaraderie and mischief. Just then, Beef walked over, his warm smile a staple of her daily routine. "Hey, Sayuri! How's it going today?"

"Hey, Beef! Just the usual work. How about you?" She smiled back, grateful for his friendly presence.

"Same old, same old. You still thinking about those guys from the festival?" he asked, leaning casually against the table.

Sayuri nodded, recalling Toru's invitation, "Yeah, Toru seems interesting. He's a bit... different."

Beef's expression shifted slightly, a hint of concern flashing in his eyes. "Just so you know, those three are low-level Yakuza. Toru's an enforcer, responsible for security of their smuggled shipments. The other two are drivers."

She had suspected there was something more to them. "Really? I guess that explains a lot."

"Be careful, Sayuri. Toru might be decent, but he has a dark and violent side," Beef warned, his tone serious. "You don't want to get tangled up in that."

Sayuri felt a bit apprehensive, but her determination to complete the mission remained strong. Toru might be her best chance to get close to Kaba, and she needed that connection.

"I get lonely sometimes. It would be nice to have someone to hang out with and talk Japanese," she admitted, choosing her words carefully and placing her hand on his arm.

"It's a pity you're married," she continued, suspecting that Beef fancied her and wanting to let him know where she stood.

Beef studied her for a moment, blushing slightly, then nodded. “Just remember what I said. Keep your guard up.”

With a plan forming in her mind, Sayuri decided to text Toru for the party details. She typed quickly, asking for the address but making sure to keep her tone noncommittal. After a few moments, her phone pinged with a response. Toru sent her the address, and she immediately showed it to Beef. He frowned slightly as he read it.

“That’s a warehouse near the river, across from the 7-Eleven. It’s a legitimate import/export business, but it’s a front for their smuggling operation.”

“Is that so?” Sayuri played dumb.

“Yeah, it’s been running since the 70s. The Yakuza partnered with the Chinese to move drugs from the Golden Triangle. It started with the CIA’s approval for the KMT to finance their resistance against the CCP by growing poppies, and it slowly evolved into a profit-driven venture.”

Sayuri absorbed the information. She already understood the gravity of what she was stepping into. “So, the warehouse is really the headquarters of their operation?”

Beef nodded; his expression serious. “I can come with you if you want. I don’t like the idea of you going there alone.”

“Thank you, Beef, but I think I’ll be fine,” she replied politely, but firmly. She needed to handle this herself.

“Just be careful, Sayuri. I don’t want anything to happen to you,” he said, concern lacing his voice.

“I will,” she assured him, her mind already racing with possibilities. With Richard arriving in three weeks, she felt the pressure to complete the mission Takuya had set for her. She couldn’t waste any time.

As she finished her now cold coffee, excitement coursed through her veins. Tomorrow’s party could be the key to everything she needed to unravel the mystery surrounding Kaba. She was determined to make it work, whatever it took.

As Sayuri approached the Yakuza warehouse party down a narrow road, a mix of excitement and apprehension coursed through her. She was grateful that the warehouse was within easy walking distance from Jolene’s house. She didn’t want to be reliant on getting a lift from one of the Yakuza guys afterward if she decided to stay longer than expected.

The narrow concrete road connected the first and second roads that ran parallel to the river, and she felt a familiar sense of the area as she walked. Her pulse quickened as she reached the address. There was no sign outside, just a nondescript metal roll-up door almost directly opposite a 7-Eleven and the entrance to one of the Thai markets. The

street outside the 7-Eleven was busy and she could smell the scent of banana from the street vendor who only sold one thing – banana pancakes with generous amounts of condensed milk - that she found hard to resist. But this particular spot where she stood was shrouded in darkness and devoid of foot traffic.

She remembered how congested this road had been on her earlier exploration, shortly after Richard had left for the Philippines. She recalled how she had been forced to walk in the street when the pavement had been blocked by unmarked boxes being loaded onto a massive truck. That day, an irate tuk-tuk driver had shouted at the truck driver to no avail, creating a bottleneck of frustrated vehicles.

Taking a deep breath, Sayuri climbed the few steps up to the loading bay. Unsure of what to do next, she scanned the walls, and noticed a faded Chinese sign high up that she had never seen before, its grime obscuring the characters. In the dim light, it seemed to hint at something deeper, something hidden. She took a few steps along the raised loading bay and discovered another roll-up door on the other side of a big pillar. A metal door was cut into the metal roll-up, the dim light making it difficult to spot. It was closed. With a mix of trepidation and determination, she tried moving the metal lever situated in the middle of the door.

To her surprise, the door opened with a creak, revealing stacks of neatly palletted boxes on both sides of the entrance, creating a 10-foot-wide corridor that led deeper into the vast warehouse. The air that wafted out was laced with the distinct smell of nicotine and she hesitated for a moment, the weight of her decision settling over her.

“Here goes nothing,” she muttered to herself, steeling her resolve.

As she stepped inside, the faint sounds of music and laughter filtered through the darkness, drawing her further in. The interior was dimly lit, with shadows dancing on the stacks of boxes. Following the sounds, she cautiously moved forward until the boxes no longer loomed large on either side of her tiny figure, revealing a much larger open space.

Sayuri stood in the shadows of the box-lined passageway, her presence unnoticed by the lively partygoers. She took a moment to absorb the scene unfolding before her. In the far corner, a trestle table held an open laptop, where a guy with earphones tapped away on the keyboard. *Probably the DJ*, she thought, observing him closely.

Cheap plastic chairs were arranged only along the outer edges of several trestle tables, loosely forming a rectangle that created an impromptu dance floor. Against the back wall, she spotted two large fridges and a chest freezer—most likely stocked with beer. Just beyond the fridges, an ornate wooden door caught her eye; quite possibly leading to the offices.

On one of the tables near the fridges, an array of spirit bottles and plastic cups was laid out, hinting at the night’s festivities. She noted what appeared to be a toilet door on the wall closest to her. From her hidden vantage point, she began counting the people visible in the dim light: twelve men, most of whom looked non-Thai—probably Japanese or Chinese, though it was too dark to tell for sure. Most of the men had a woman clinging to his side, all of them appearing Thai and likely working as bar girls.

The atmosphere felt genuine, not just a ruse spun by Toru to lure her into the warehouse. Still, Sayuri remained cautious. Her experiences in Tokyo had taught her that men could not be trusted. Often, women were even worse. Her instincts were alert as she scanned the room, every detail reinforcing her wariness in this unfamiliar environment. Listening to the chatting and laughing, she sensed the atmosphere was thick with camaraderie, but with an undercurrent of something more dangerous. She could hear snippets of conversation in Japanese, the language wrapping around her like a familiar embrace. She reminded herself of her purpose; *This is not pleasure – it is just business.*

She needed to connect with Toru, and use him to get close to Kaba so she had to carve out a space for herself in this new underworld that felt so foreign yet simultaneously familiar.

Sayuri stepped from the shadows of the box-lined passageway into the open section of the warehouse, her nerves jangling as she took in the lively scene before her. The vibrant atmosphere pulsed with music and laughter, but her nerves were palpable. Almost instinctively, she noticed Toru's hand shift to the gun tucked into the back of his trousers, a reflex born from his role as security. But as recognition dawned, his expression softened, and he called her over with a welcoming smile.

“Sayuri!” he beckoned, gesturing her closer. “Come meet everyone!”

Despite her initial hesitation, she walked toward him, feeling a mixture of excitement and shyness. Toru introduced her to the small group gathered around—a mix of familiar faces from the *Tanabata* Festival and a few new ones. Socializing was never her strong suit, and she felt a twinge of awkwardness as she greeted them.

“Hey, you look great!” one of the guys said, and she offered a polite smile, feeling slightly out of place.

Toru, sensing her discomfort, handed her a cold beer. “Here, this should help!”

Gratefully, she accepted it, the cool bottle a welcome distraction. As she took a sip, she noticed that Toru was one of the few men without a female partner draped on his arm. The thought crossed her mind that perhaps he didn't want her to feel left out, that in his mind, she was his ‘partner’ for the night.

Scanning the crowd, she spotted two other men similarly unaccompanied. One of them fit Takuya's description of Kaba, heightening her curiosity. The Yakuza were notoriously secretive, and without any online presence, she had to rely on her instincts and observations.

Kaba looked to be in his 40s, of average height and build, with a clean-shaven face and thick black hair slicked back. He wore an unbuttoned casual jacket over a white vest, paired with dark trousers and polished black leather shoes—his style striking a balance between casual and sophisticated.

Sayuri, a fashion-savvy woman like most Japanese, suspected that his entire outfit was likely from *N.Hoolywood*. He seemed calm and collected, exuding an air of confidence

and control with his assertive body language reflecting his high status. As the most senior Yakuza member at the party, the respect of the other Japanese men in the room was unmistakable. She wondered if Masashi spent much time at the warehouse.

The music shifted to a lively Thai tune, and she noticed the bar girls swirling around the dance floor, fully immersed in the rhythm. Toru leaned closer, his voice playful, “Want to dance?”

Sayuri hesitated, a playful smile tugging at her lips. “I only dance to Japanese or Western pop music.”

He raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Really? Let me see what I can do.” He turned to the makeshift DJ at the trestle table, a guy still tapping away at the laptop. “Hey! Play *Lion Heart* by SMAP!”

Sayuri's heart skipped a beat at the familiar melody. It was a classic from the 90s, and it brought a wave of nostalgia. As the opening notes filled the air, she felt a flicker of excitement. Though still too sober to fully relax, she couldn't resist the urge to dance. Stepping onto the makeshift dance floor, she moved to the rhythm, letting the music wash over her. Toru joined her, trying to dance close, but she playfully edged away, laughing as she did.

“Come on, don't be shy!” he teased, trying to bridge the distance, but she maintained her playful stance, enjoying the flirtation.

In her mind, she calculated her moves. The more she could entrance Toru, the more leverage she would have to ask him about Kaba and the Yakuza operations. She twirled and spun, laughing as she kept him at a teasing distance, enjoying the attention while keeping her true intentions close to her chest.

As the song progressed, she could see the admiration in Toru's eyes, and it fuelled her confidence. This was her chance to navigate this world, and with a little charm, she could turn this night into something more than just a party. Toru, not wanting to allow Sayuri off the dance floor continued to pepper the DJ with song requests. After ‘*Lion Heart*’ came ‘*Sekai ni Hitotsu Dake no Hana*’ followed by *Aishiteru*, which made Sayuri feel a bit uncomfortable.

“I'm a bit hot now,” she said to Toru as the song ended. It was true; the warehouse was stuffy and dancing quickly led to discomfort.

“You're right. It is getting quite hot. Go grab some beers and I'll be back in a minute, OK?”

“Hai!” she replied, as she made a beeline for the fridges. She grabbed two ice-cold Asahi beers and headed back towards the table where most of the Japanese guys were milling around.

Kaba was holding court. “...he thought he could just not pay us, but when I was finished with him, he was lucky to still be breathing. We got paid, of course! Ha-ha!”

Taking the opportunity to be noticed by Kaba, Sayuri forced a loud laugh, which immediately made heads swivel in her direction.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” apologised exaggeratedly, “I didn’t mean to be so loud.”

“What is your name again,” Kaba asked.

“*Sato, Sayuri, desu!*” she answered formally.

“Are you here with Toru?”

“Well, no. Toru invited me but I am not ‘with’ him, if you know what I mean,” Sayuri replied diplomatically. Her reply brought a small smirk to Kaba’s face. She knew exactly what he was thinking: *Fresh fish!*

Sayuri had no idea how many Japanese women lived in this part of Thailand, or in Laos, but, if she had to take a guess – not many. Kaba no doubt preferred Japanese women to bar girls – as did all Japanese men. Japan’s patriarchal society made Japanese women less inclined to say no to sexual advances. It was just one more thing Sayuri had learned to ‘grin and bear’ growing up with the reality of the complicated Japanese gender dynamics that had existed for centuries. She had enough experience to know that Kaba would, from this moment on, only see her as a potential sexual conquest – nothing more.

Another one hooked. Who is the fish now, bad boy? she thought to herself, mentally patting herself on the back.

She purposely turned her back on Kaba, knowing that it would only sink her hook further. Just then, Toru appeared holding two huge industrial fans – one in each hand. She could see he was struggling with their weight, but was putting on a brave face in front of her.

Men are so basic, she thought, smiling to herself. Toru, upon seeing her smile, instantly smiled back, unaware that he was silently being mocked. Placing the fans strategically around the dancing area, he returned to join Sayuri, who was all too aware of how complicated the evening had suddenly become. Her natural appeal as a sex symbol had complicated her life far too many times. She needed to clear the air.

She actually found Toru quite charming. His playful banter and easy smile made her feel at ease, but she reminded herself that getting too close to him wasn’t a good idea for several reasons: the complicated love triangle with Ricky and Richard weighed heavily on her, and she didn’t want to get sucked back into the Yakuza underworld. Most importantly, her mission to get close to Kaba would be jeopardized if she let her flirtations with Toru escalate. The last thing she needed was a jealous Toru exploding at the sight of her flirting with Kaba; that would spell disaster, especially since he was armed.

After a moment of contemplation, Sayuri decided that honesty was the best policy. She turned to Toru, taking a deep breath.

“Toru, you’re a really nice guy, and I enjoy your company, but I didn’t accept your party invitation because I want to hook up with you. I only came because it’s been a long time since I’ve had the chance to socialise with Japanese-speaking people.”

Toru's face fell slightly, and she could see the disappointment wash over him. “Oh! I’m sorry, Sayuri. I thought you liked me.”

She felt a pang of guilt at his reaction. Gently, she placed a hand on his forearm, trying to console him. “I do like you, Toru—just not in that way. I’m sorry. But will you accept being my best friend in Nong Pai?”

His expression softened slightly, and he regarded her with a mix of surprise and relief. “Best friend, huh? I can do that,” he replied, a tentative smile creeping back onto his face.

There was an awkward silence between them for a few seconds before Toru said, “Well, at least you friend-zoned me quickly. I appreciate that. Nobody likes to hear the truth. It hurts. But I respect you being honest with me.” He smiled, then continued, “But that doesn’t mean you can just leave the party now,” he said playfully, grabbing her hand gently and leading onto the dance floor once again.

“Of course, not” she said, feeling a weight lift off her shoulders. “I need friends who I can dance with,” she replied, a genuine smile forming. Toru nodded, his demeanour shifting back to a more light-hearted tone.

“Okay, best friend. Just know I’m still going to look out for you.”

She chuckled, grateful for his understanding. “I appreciate that. Just no more party invitations for now, okay?”

“Deal,” he said, raising his beer in a mock toast. They clinked their bottles together, and for a moment, the tension faded into the background. Toru was still unaware of the exchange between Sayuri and Kaba that had happened while he was fetching the fans, and Sayuri was intent on keeping it that way. As the party continued to swell with laughter and energy, Sayuri found herself drinking a few more beers, the alcohol loosening her initial tension.

As the music pulsed around them, Sayuri felt a renewed sense of purpose. With Toru as her ally, she could navigate this world more easily. But her focus remained on the ultimate goal - forging a connection with Kaba. She glanced over at him, still commanding respect from the group, and steeled herself for the next step in her mission.

It’s time to go home, Sayuri decided as she stumbled on her way to the toilet, managing to regain her balance without making a spectacle of herself.

“I have to go now,” she told Toru upon her return to the table where he sat drinking. She noticed that Kaba was standing close by, beer in hand.

“I can take you home,” Kaba offered, before Toru had a chance to reply. Sayuri had expected Toru to offer, but Kaba was too quick – and keen.

“It’s OK. I’m fine,” she lied, knowing that if she didn’t leave immediately, that she would make a fool of herself. Beer was her kryptonite.

“How are you getting home?” Toru asked, genuinely concerned. Sayuri had a hard and fast rule – always lie about where you live. Men were not to be trusted, especially when they were thinking with their small heads and not their big heads.

“I have the tuk-tuk number,” she said truthfully, not letting on that she lived nearby.

“Are you sure I can’t give you a lift,” Kaba tried again.

“I’m sure,” Sayuri said. “But you can give me your number in case I get into trouble,” she suggested, knowing that Kaba would not hesitate to give his number to her.

Wouldn’t he just love to rescue a ‘damsel in distress’, Sayuri thought, and then forcefully take advantage of her, her train of thought continued.

“OK. My number is 0655332830.”

Sayuri entered Kaba’s phone number into her phone, noticing the sour look on Toru’s face as she did so.

“OK. I’m off. Thank you so much Toru for inviting me to the party. I had a great time,” Sayuri said, touching Toru’s arm affectionately.

“Thank you for coming,” Toru responded, forcing a smile.

CHAPTER 40

Sayuri stood in the bathroom of Jolene's house, the fragrant scent of berry shampoo filling the air as she lathered her hair. The warm water cascaded down her body, and she relished the moment of solitude. Richard had arrived a few hours earlier, exhausted from three days of travel from South Africa. Now, he was sound asleep in the bedroom, and the thought of him sent a flutter of excitement through her. Only now, with him back, did she realize just how much she had missed him. She had been faithful, resisting temptations and keeping her distance from others, including Toru, whom she had firmly told she only wanted to be friends with.

Her recent brief meeting with Kaba for coffee at Miyagi restaurant had felt like a safe place to meet, but had not deterred Kaba, who had insisted that she come see his house. She had declined his invitation to see his place, wanting to keep things uncomplicated, even though she had been hoping to resolve the Kaba problem for Takuya before Richard returned. It was not to be. Since then, Kaba had been away in Laos for two weeks.

After rinsing the shampoo from her hair, Sayuri wrapped a towel around her naked body, still dripping wet. A mischievous grin spread across her face as she padded to the bedroom. Sitting on the edge of the mattress next to Richard's sleeping form, she gently stroked his bare back.

"Hun-nee," she called softly, her voice a teasing whisper meant to stir him awake.

Richard stirred slowly, rolling onto his back to face her, his 'sleep face' unshaven and slightly dishevelled. Sayuri couldn't help but think to herself, *That is not his best look*, she thought, appreciating him all the same.

"Hello, baby. What time is it?" he mumbled; his voice thick with sleep.

"It's time to get up. Come to the shower. You smell," she replied straightforwardly, not intending to be mean, just honest. She accepted his flaws as part of who he was and simply wanted to help him feel fresh. Richard chuckled groggily, his eyes still half-closed, but he took her hand, allowing her to lead him. As they stepped into the bathroom, Sayuri poured a scoop of cold water over his head.

"Whooo!" he shouted, jolted awake as he laughed, the shock bringing him to full alertness. "That's refreshing!"

Sayuri giggled, her heart light as she grabbed the soap and began to lather his body, enjoying the intimacy of the moment. She rinsed him off, her fingers gliding over his skin, feeling the warmth of his body beneath hers.

"Okay, now you must shave and brush your teeth," she instructed playfully. "I'll be in bed waiting for you with a 'welcome present.'"

Richard raised an eyebrow, a smile creeping onto his face. “Oh really? You know how to tempt a guy.”

“Just keeping it interesting,” she teased, giving him a quick peck on the cheek before turning to leave the bathroom.

As she headed back to the bedroom, Sayuri felt a surge of happiness. Richard was home, and despite the complexities of her life, she was ready to embrace the night ahead. She lay back on the bed, eagerly anticipating his return, her mind temporarily distracted from her Yakuza problem.

She could hear the bathroom tap running, indicating that Richard was obeying her instructions. She hadn’t told him yet, but she was not a fan of his tobacco breath; and his beard stubble pricked her face when they kissed which prevented her from fully enjoying the intimacy. Hearing the tap close, she lifted her bum and unwrapped the towel, noticing that she was almost dry.

Richard’s big frame entered the room. *What an improvement!* she thought as he lumbered towards the bed, clean-shaven, feet pointing inwards. *So cute*, she thought. It automatically brought a smile to her face. He stood for a moment, looking down on her naked figure, then walked around to the foot of the bed and gently grabbed her feet and spread her legs. This was her favourite part. Richard was a thoughtful lover, always taking care of her needs before his. He started kissing her feet slowly working his way up to the pelvic area, alternating between each of her legs. It was heaven. An involuntary shiver ran down her spine as he momentarily lingered just above her thighs, looking up at her face and giving her a wicked smile. Sayuri squirmed in ecstasy as he went to work, expertly bringing her to the point of no return.

I want him NOW! she thought urgently, putting one hand behind his neck and signalling him to come up for air. Sexually, he was way better than Ricky, who was a selfish lover. Yet, she had a strong connection to Ricky for some reason she couldn’t pin down. She pulled her knees up on either side of her body, allowing Richard to ease into her. *Yes, it is definitely heavenly*, she reaffirmed as she spoke to God in anime – despite not being a believer.

Richard sat relaxed on the sofa, the background humming of the large lounge fans subconsciously soothing him as he watched wildlife videos. Sayuri had spent the afternoon immersed in her web design work, her focus evident as she tapped away at her laptop. But she had also been planning something special for his return.

Taking a much-needed break from work, she had taken a long walk to Lotus to buy ingredients for the special supper she had planned. Despite having Jolene’s scooter at her disposal, walking was better for her health, allowing her to loosen her lower back muscles which had given her a lifetime of pain. Working on her laptop at home was not ergonomically good for her, and another reason why she often did her work in coffee shops.

She had felt much better upon her return to the house, her backpack full of culinary delights. She could tell Richard missed her. He came and leant against the door of the kitchen as she unpacked and started asking random questions about supper.

“What are you making for supper, baby?”

“It’s a surprise,” she said, giving him a look that said: *Stop asking questions and go and watch TV.*

Richard watched her bustling around the kitchen for a few minutes, her movements graceful and purposeful. She was in her element, the scent of spices and cooked dishes wafting through the air, making his stomach rumble with anticipation.

“Hun-nee, you are not allowed in the kitchen tonight, OK?” Sayuri said, finally putting her foot down gently as she glided over to him and gave him a peck on the cheek. “Go and relax,” she said, giving him a playful nudge.

“Ok, baby,” he conceded, duck-walking his way back to the lounge.

Sayuri emerged from the kitchen almost an hour later, her face glowing with satisfaction.

“Finally,” he teased, as she placed the tray with all the dishes on the coffee table.

She knew Richard liked to eat early, but tonight was an exception. A vibrant spread of colourful ingredients filled the table: steaming jasmine rice, fragrant green curry, fresh spring rolls, and a salad bursting with herbs and vegetables.

“Welcome home!” she announced playfully, her eyes sparkling with excitement as she gestured to the feast. Richard couldn’t help but smile, his heart swelling with gratitude.

“Wow, baby, this looks amazing!” He sat up, taking in the effort she had put into the meal. “You really went all out.”

“I wanted to make it special,” she replied, moving to sit beside him on the couch. The warmth of her presence was comforting, and he could feel the love she had infused into every dish.

“Special indeed,” he said, leaning in to steal a quick kiss. “It’s perfect.”

Suddenly, she sprang up again, “Oh, I forgot something!” she exclaimed and scuttled off back to the kitchen, her ‘indoor slippers’ making clacking noises as she went. In the blink of an eye, she was back, two long-tom Chang beers in hand.

“Do you want glass?” she inquired, remaining standing.

“No, it’s fine,” Richard replied, “Sit baby. Let’s eat.”

They settled into their familiar routine, the TV flickering softly in the background as they began to serve themselves. Sayuri opened the beers and handed one to Richard.

“Kanpai!” she toasted.

“Kanpai!” hailed Richard, tapping his can softly against hers.

As they dug into the meal, Richard savoured each bite, marvelling at Sayuri’s culinary skills. “This curry is incredible! It’s almost as good as mine,” he said between mouthfuls.

“I know you are lying. I’ve tasted your curry!” she laughed; her cheeks slightly flushed.

“Well, my mother taught me how to make curry. But I think you would call mine ‘Indian curry’ and yours, ‘Japanese curry’. There are 100s of different curry recipes and I guess we all like to eat food that reminds us of home.”

“So, your mother taught you to cook. Were you close to her?” Sayuri asked, wanting to know more about this lovely man who had decided to come and live with her in Thailand.

“As close as can be, I suppose. She was a difficult person. Quite dramatic,” Richard said slowly, appearing to choose his words carefully.

“What is dramatic?” asked Sayuri, always willing to learn new words in English.

Richard thought for a moment, then said, “She liked attention.”

“OK. I understand,” she nodded, taking another sip of her beer.

“So, what was it like for you growing up? Were you close to your mother? I know you mentioned your parents are divorced,” Richard asked in his sweetest voice.

“Yes, I was closer to my mother than my father, especially when I was at school. She also taught me how to cook,” she replied, giving a weak smile.

“What happened to your father? You said your mother lived alone in Tokyo. Did he pass away?” Richard asked, his voice gentle yet probing.

“My father was a good father, but a bad husband,” Sayuri replied, her tone reflective.

“What do you mean?” Richard asked, his curiosity piqued.

She hesitated, searching for the right words. “He hated his job at the bank. He drank every day after work and was not a happy person.”

Richard nodded, absorbing her words. “Is he still alive?”

“I think so,” Sayuri guessed, her brow furrowing as tried to recall the last time she heard anything about him. “My parents got divorced when I was still a teenager.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Richard said genuinely, a shadow of sadness crossing his face.

“Yes, I am sorry too. I told my mother to divorce him,” she said pensively, her voice quiet as she recalled the painful memories.

“Because of the drinking?” Richard asked, piecing together the situation.

“Drinking, gambling, women...” Sayuri began listing her father’s faults, each word tinged with a mix of anger and disappointment.

“We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” Richard offered, noticing how the conversation was darkening the atmosphere around them.

“It’s okay,” Sayuri replied, her eyes meeting his. “I’ve never told any man before, but I like to talk with you.”

“Thank you,” Richard said, a soft smile spreading across his face.

“Yes, you really care for me, I think,” Sayuri said, her honesty punctuating the air between them.

“I do,” Richard agreed, his sincerity evident.

“After my mother divorced my father, he drank more and more and lost his job,” she continued, the weight of her words heavy on her heart.

“That’s terrible,” Richard consoled her, leaning forward slightly, his expression empathetic.

“Then he couldn’t pay money every month to my mother,” she said, a look of disappointment shadowing her face. “I wanted to travel, but I stayed in Tokyo to look after my mother.”

“That must have been really difficult for you,” Richard said gently. “You put her needs before your own.”

Sayuri sighed, the regret evident in her eyes. “Gaman. I felt responsible. She was struggling, and I didn’t want her to be alone. But sometimes I wonder what my life would have been like if I had chosen differently.”

Richard reached out, placing a comforting hand on hers. “It sounds like you made sacrifices out of love. That’s not something to regret.”

She smiled slightly, grateful for his understanding. “Thank you for saying that. It’s just... sometimes it’s hard to see the positives when you’re so close to the pain.”

“Let’s focus on the future instead,” Richard suggested, his tone shifting to something lighter. “You have a new life here in Thailand. What do you want to do now that you’re free from all that?”

Sayuri's expression brightened at the shift in conversation. "I want to explore. I want to travel to places I've never been, meet new people, and experience everything this beautiful country has to offer."

Richard smiled, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "Then let's make that happen. I'm excited to have new adventures with you."

"I have never travelled anywhere with a man before. I don't know if I can. I always travel alone," she said honestly, knowing that her words might hurt Richard, but deciding that there was no point in delaying the truth. She could see how her honesty had shocked Richard. He stared at her thoughtfully - speechless.

Finally, he said, "You know, I never realised this before, but I also like to travel alone," and he started laughing.

"Wow! My first reaction was to be upset, but, now that I think about it, I am the same!"

Relieved to hear him laugh, Sayuri started chuckling, "*Kanpai!*" she toasted once again, her spirits rising.

"*Kanpai!*" Richard chorused, tapping his beer against hers.

Talking to Richard was so much easier than talking to Ricky. No judgement; no drama and no sulking. Sayuri was beginning to wonder why she had ended up falling for Ricky in the first place. She had read somewhere that pheromones could play a role in sexual attraction, with many of their effects occurring at a subconscious level.

That must be it, she decided, taking another sip of beer. So far – in these early days of the relationship – she was enjoying having Richard in her life. She was sure that, once the honeymoon period was over, things would change, but, for now, she was content. Richard made her feel safe. And loved. Very much loved. Telling him about her parent's divorce had surprised her. She had been determined never to share that secret, yet she had unburdened herself without duress, voluntarily sharing a very painful memory with a man she had only known for two weeks. But her parents' divorce was many years ago. It no longer had any real effect on her present-day life. The Yakuza on the other hand...

CHAPTER 41

Sayuri sat cross-legged on the sofa in Jolene's house, the late afternoon sun filtering through the curtains and casting a warm glow around the room. Thailand was a sunny country – unlike Japan. Growing up with snowy winters has seemed normal until she had started travelling around Asia. Now, the thought of snow made her shiver.

Richard had settled back into Nong Pai a few days ago, and their time together had been blissful. But beneath her contentment lurked a gnawing anxiety about Kaba. She needed information on his embezzlement, and, so far, her methods weren't yielding results.

Her mind raced as she considered her options. She pulled out her phone, scrolling through her contacts until she found Toru's number. A plan began to form—one that involved a bit of charm and flirtation. If she could rekindle the connection with Toru, perhaps he would be more willing to share what he knew. Taking a deep breath, she pressed the call button and waited. When Toru picked up, his voice came through cheerful and slightly surprised.

"Sayuri! How are you?"

"Hey, Toru! I'm good, thanks. I was wondering if you'd like to grab some drinks tonight. Just as friends?"

There was a brief pause on the other end, and she could almost hear him considering the invitation. "Sure! Sounds great. Where do you want to meet?"

"How about that little bar near the river? I'll be there around 7," Sayuri suggested.

"Which little bar? There are a few," Toru inquired.

"It's called *Buddha Bar*. Next to the temple where they have the night market. Do you know it?" Sayuri explained.

"Ok, I know the place. See you at 7. Bye."

"Ok. Great! Bye."

After ending the call, Sayuri felt a mix of excitement and trepidation. She knew that Toru might have information about Kaba, but the Yakuza were all sworn to secrecy and used fear to keep people from talking. The Yakuza environment was steeped in intimidation, and she was aware that Toru might be hesitant to share anything that could put him at risk. Yet Sayuri also knew the power she wielded. Men had always been drawn to her, often fighting over her attention. With a confident smile, she set about preparing for the evening.

Sayuri was grateful that Richard never questioned her when she said she was going somewhere. He had no reason to. In the time that they had been living together, she had

never once lied to him. Yes, she had withheld information, but she had never told a lie. She chose a fitted dress that accentuated her figure, knowing it would catch Toru's eye. Richard was of the opinion that all of her outfits were sexy, so she doubted that his suspicions would be aroused.

As she applied her makeup, she contemplated her approach with Toru. She would need to flirt, to remind him of the chemistry they once shared. If she could make him feel important and desired, he might let his guard down.

"I'm going to the night market," she announced to Richard, who was busy cooking. It was his turn to cook. He looked up at her, wooden spoon in hand, and said, "You look lovely – as always, baby," gesturing for her to give him a good bye kiss, which she dutifully did.

"I'll eat when I get home. I'll get some of those spicy sausages that you like," she told him, smiling – relieved that she had not been forced to lie. She intended to go to the night market near 'Buddha Bar' after her meeting with Toru.

When she arrived at the bar, the atmosphere was lively, filled with laughter and chatter. Market nights were good business for the bars in the area, with an eclectic mix of Thais and 'farangs'. She spotted Toru at a table near the back, his expression brightening when he saw her.

"Sayuri! You look amazing!" he exclaimed as she approached.

"Thanks, Toru! You clean up well yourself," she replied, her tone playful, as she slid into the seat across from him.

They ordered drinks, the conversation flowing easily at first. Sayuri laughed at his stories, leaning in slightly to create a sense of intimacy. She could feel the tension in the air shift as she let her charm work its magic.

"You know Toru, I have a confession to make," Sayuri said, going into actress mode.

"Oh, yeah? Interesting. Tell me all," Toru said, raising one eyebrow.

"I think I may have misjudged you. My first impression of you was that you were just a thug. All muscle and no substance. But, now that I am getting to know you better, I see that I was wrong," Sayuri confessed.

"Yeah. I get that a lot. Tell me, what did you get wrong about me?" Toru enquired, curious.

"Well, for a start, you have a gentler nature than I expected," Sayuri said, giving him her best smile.

"Thanks. And...what else?" Toru asked, fishing for compliments.

“You have a good sense of humour, something I never expected from a Yakuza enforcer,” she continued.

“I think a sense of humour is necessary in the world I live in,” he said earnestly. “I’ve had to do some terrible things in the course of my work. If I don’t find a way to laugh, I’ll probably go insane,” he said, getting serious.

“It sounds challenging,” Sayuri sympathised, knowing that her empathy and compliments were making it easier for her to deepen her bond with him.

“It is. You know, I never envisaged this life for me as a child. I wanted to be a pilot,” Toru opened up.

“Really?” exclaimed Sayuri, genuinely surprised.

“Yes. I had a passion for airplanes when I was a kid. My parents used to always give me model airplanes for my birthday. I used to make them and then hang them from my bedroom ceiling. It looked really cool,” he reminisced – his expression tightening slightly.

“So, what happened? Why didn’t you become a pilot?” Sayuri asked gently.

“Both my parents died in the 1995 Kobe earthquake,” he said quietly. “I was at school. I never saw our house again.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” said Sayuri, genuinely.

“Thanks,” said Toru, soulfully.

“Where did you go live?” probed Sayuri.

“At first, I lived with my uncle in Kobe. It was OK, but he was never at home – always doing Yakuza work for his cousin, Yoshinori Watanabe.”

Sayuri was startled at the mention of Yoshinori’s name. Yoshinori Watanabe was Ken Watanabe’s uncle, and the top boss of the Yamaguchi-Gumi clan.

“Do you know him?” Toru asked, noticing Sayuri’s shock.

“No,” she lied. “But I have heard stories,” she said. “He is a powerful man.”

“Yes, he is,” affirmed Toru. “Also, incredibly intelligent and wise. I owe him a lot,” said Toru, slightly nodding his head.

“Why is that?” queried Sayuri, no longer feigning interest.

“He was astute enough to realise that my uncle was not taking good care of me and he offered me job when I graduated from high school – working for the Yakuza.”

Sayuri was impressed to hear that Toru had graduated from high school. She now felt a bit guilty in having judged Toru so hastily, not having attended high school herself.

“What was the job?” Sayuri asked, absorbed in Toru’s tale.

“Gopher,” he chuckled.

“Gopher?” Sayuri repeated quizzically.

“Yes – go for this, go for that...” he tried explaining.

“I still don’t understand,” said Sayuri, a frown forming on her face.

“Never mind. I was an errand boy basically. I told myself that I would only do it until I had saved enough money to start training as a pilot. That never happened,” Toru said, letting out an audible sigh.

Sayuri could tell that Toru regretted the path his life had taken – much like she did. What had started out as a ploy to get Toru to bond with her had morphed into a real connection with him. Both of them had bad memories from their childhood and both of them had unintentionally ended up working for the Yakuza. That was a bond that could not be faked.

“How did you end up in Thailand,” Sayuri continued with the questioning.

Toru paused for a moment. He seemed to be taking stock of their conversation so far, weighing up whether it was a good idea to reveal more about himself or not. Finally, he said, “I killed a guy.”

Sayuri was not shocked by this. She had spent many years in the Yakuza underworld in Tokyo. Sadly, bad things shocked her less than good things.

“I won’t ask any more questions. I can see that was not easy for you to admit. Thank you for sharing,” she said, placing her hand on his.

Toru looked embarrassed. “Another round?” he asked, steering the topic away from his past.

“Sure,” Sayuri smiled, satisfied with the progress she was making with Toru. She knew that, after revealing some of his most painful secrets, Toru was now deeply connected to Sayuri, as if they both belonged to some Yakuza Secret Society. It was time to relieve the pressure. No more personal probing. Tomorrow was another day and she couldn’t stay much longer anyway if she was to avoid arousing Richard’s suspicion.

When Toru returned with two more beers, Sayuri said, “Toru, this will be my last drink. I still have some web design work to do tonight,” she lied. “But I have thoroughly enjoyed spending time with you. It turns out you are a rough diamond,” she smiled flirtatiously. She couldn’t tell if Toru was blushing or not, but he gave her a sheepish smile and just said, “Thank you. I enjoyed it too.”

They talked about their childhood days in Tokyo while they finished their beers, Sayuri being careful not to let slip that, she too, had Yakuza connections.

“I have to go,” she said, taking the last sip of her beer and standing up.

“Do I know you well enough now to get your number,” Toru tried his luck.

“Nope. Sorry. Nobody gets my number. It’s not personal. But don’t worry, I will definitely call you during the week. How can I resist such a charming man,” she flirted, keeping Toru on the hook.

“I look forward to hearing from you,” he said, a bit too enthusiastically.

Sayuri thought he was about to lean in and kiss her, but he appeared to have had a change of mind and offered his hand instead. Sayuri gave him a knowing look and shook his hand, then turned and left – not turning back to look at him. That would be too easy. The fish was hooked, but if she didn’t reel him in patiently, she might lose her fish.

CHAPTER 42

Sayuri settled into her usual work spot on the chaise lounge, her laptop perched on her lap as she focused intently on her web design project. The soft glow of the screen illuminated her face, and she was lost in the rhythm of coding when Richard's voice broke through her concentration.

"How do you say '*chikatetsu*'?" he asked suddenly, his tone curious.

She glanced up, slightly annoyed at the disruption. "You said it correctly," she replied, trying to refocus on her work.

"I think it is a very sexy word," Richard said, getting out of bed and sauntering over to her side. His playful demeanour was infectious, and she felt a tug of amusement despite herself.

"You are *chikatetsu*," he said huskily, bending down to plant a quick kiss on her cheek.

"I am a subway?" Sayuri shot back, catching the joke but not wanting to encourage his silliness. Richard's western sense of humour often took her by surprise. While she didn't dislike it, she found many of his jokes fell flat for her. But she knew he felt the same about Japanese humour. Just the other night, during a Japanese movie involving a stand-up comedian that they had watched together on Netflix, he had commented that either the subtitles were wrong or the jokes were stupid. She couldn't help but wonder if that had influenced her reaction to his current quip.

"No, you're not a subway. You are sexy," Richard countered, feigning seriousness. "But I have decided that *chikatetsu* is a sexy word, so I'm allowed to use it when I compliment you."

She couldn't maintain her serious facade any longer and broke into a smile. "I know, hun-nee. I understand the joke."

Richard's playful grin widened. "Do you have many projects at the moment, baby?"

"Only two now. But they finish nearly." She struggled slightly with her English, a small frown creasing her brow as she realized her phrasing.

Richard smiled, his eyes twinkling with affection. He appreciated her effort, knowing that sometimes the English words just didn't come out right. Communication, he believed, was all about understanding the message behind the words, and he didn't mind the occasional grammatical slip. Only grammar Nazis worried about such things.

"Almost done?" he asked, leaning against the chaise long, genuinely interested. "That's great! What are you working on?"

She gestured to the screen, pulling up her projects. "A website for a Tokyo café and a portfolio for a photographer. Both should finish soon," she said, her voice filled with pride.

"Busy bee!" he teased, his playful demeanour returning.

"Just because I look relaxed doesn't mean I'm not working hard," she retorted, rolling her eyes, but her smile betrayed her amusement.

"If you were one of my students when I was still teaching, I would have given you lots of gold stars," he said lovingly.

Sayuri chuckled, shaking her head as she returned her focus to her laptop. Despite the occasional frustration with Richard's humour, moments like these made her appreciate their time together. She loved how he could lighten the atmosphere, even as she delved into her work. Richard blew her a kiss and was about to leave the room when she said, "Oh! I forgot to tell you. I might go to Pattaya next week."

Richard stopped, turned, and said, "Really?"

"Leally," she said, intentionally emphasising the 'L' in an effort to keep the mood light.

"What are you going there for?" he asked, seriously.

"It's my daughter's birthday. She will fly to Thailand before she goes to the Philippines," Sayuri answered truthfully.

"Your daughter's birthday," Richard repeated slowly. Sayuri couldn't be sure if she detected a hint of doubt in Richard's voice.

"Yes. Do you remember I told you I have a daughter? Her name is Naomi."

She could see Richard's brain working overtime as he tried to recollect.

"Yes, Naomi. Is she a SCUBA diver?" he asked, curiously.

"Ha-ha! Noooo! She is not a diver. There is a college in Cebu where a lot of Japanese university students go during their break to study English," Sayuri replied, chuckling.

"OK. Interesting. But why the Philippines?" he asked, a puzzled look on his face.

"It is a lot cheaper than Japan and I have to pay for it," she said matter-of-factly.

She could see Richard visibly relax as she spoke, and it became clear that he had realized Sayuri was telling the truth.

"OK. That makes sense. How long will you be away for?" he asked, looking forlorn.

“About a week. Two days travelling, one day in Bangkok shopping, and then four days in Jomtien Beach,” she explained.

“I see. Well, I hope you have a good time with Naomi,” he said. She could see that he meant what he said. That was one of the things she really liked about Richard – he had a heart of gold. He was a bit eccentric, yes, but he genuinely cared about others. And he loved cats.

Sayuri sat at her desk, lost in thought. She was determined to complete her “Kaba mission” before her trip to Pattaya with Naomi next week. This was her chance to wrap up unfinished business, and once she did, Takuya would finally consider her debt paid off. A clean slate awaited her, and the thought filled her with a mix of anticipation and anxiety. With a decisive click, she opened her LINE messaging app and texted Toru.

I enjoyed our time together so much last time. Let’s do it again.

She hesitated for a moment, then hit send. Almost immediately, her phone buzzed with his enthusiastic reply.

Absolutely! Can’t wait!

Feeling a sense of exhilaration, Sayuri turned to Richard, who was lounging on the sofa with a book. “I’m going to walk to the shopping centre to look for a present for Naomi,” she announced.

“OK, baby. Sounds good,” Richard replied, glancing up with a smile. He trusted her completely. She was grateful for that.

As she stepped outside, the heat enveloped her like a thick blanket. The start of the monsoon season in June had brought some relief from the oppressive heat of spring, but the days were still extremely hot and humid. Fortunately, the nightly rains made sleeping a bit easier, as they cooled the house down.

The familiar sights and sounds of Nong Pai buzzed around her as she walked to her rendezvous with Toru. She usually took the time to enjoy her daily walks, but her mind was filled with thoughts of her upcoming meeting, making it impossible.

Arriving at *Buddha Bar*, she pushed open the door and scanned the room. There he was—Toru, already seated at a table near the back, a wide grin spreading across his face as he spotted her entering.

“Hey, Sayuri!” he called out, standing up a little too eagerly. She felt a flutter of amusement; his infatuation was almost palpable.

“I bought you a beer,” he said, excitement threading through his voice as he gestured to the Chang beer sitting in front of her.

“Wow, you really know how to treat a girl,” she replied, taking a seat across from him. She could see how genuinely happy he was to be meeting her again, his eyes sparkling with admiration.

Toru leaned in slightly, his enthusiasm infectious. “I hope you enjoy it. I remembered you drinking Chang last time.”

Sayuri smiled, taking a sip of the cold beer. “It’s perfect. Thanks, Toru.”

Sayuri could see that Toru was nervous. He was probably thinking that her invitation for a drink might lead to more intimate activities. All men lived in hope of getting laid.

As they settled into conversation, Sayuri couldn’t help but notice how smitten he was. His eagerness to impress her was charming, and for a moment, she allowed herself to indulge in the attention. They talked about everything from the local food scene to their favourite movies, laughter punctuating their exchanges.

Sayuri was aware that she probably had two hours to spare before Richard would start worrying. The previous week, she had gone for a long walk and had messed up. When Richard had asked approximately how long she would be gone for, she had said two hours. It had been three. He had not said anything, but he had been waiting on the verandah, beer in hand, upon her return, something he had never done before.

She recalled a conversation they had had in the first week that they had met, when Richard had told her how unsafe South Africa was and that women never went walking around town alone at night. It had been his way of telling her that he worried about her nocturnal wanderings. She had soon learned that it was best to not set a time for her return - it only made him stressed out. Now all she said was - “See you later hun-nee!” as she left the house. But she didn’t want to abuse it. Two hours was within Richard’s ‘no-panic’ zone.

Beneath the surface of her enjoyment, the weight of her mission lingered in her mind. It was time to steer the conversation in the right direction. She needed to gather information about Kaba, and Toru might just be the key. As she sipped her beer and watched him animatedly discuss a recent film, she reminded herself to stay focused. This was all part of her plan, and she had to navigate it carefully.

“Tell me, Toru – is Kaba married? she asked suddenly, wanting to get Toru’s undivided attention.

Toru looked up, startled, a shadow passing over his face. “Why do you want to know that?” he asked, his tone a mix of curiosity and something darker.

She smiled, maintaining her calm demeanour. “I was just thinking about the party at the warehouse. He looked very smart that night. I was wondering why he wasn’t with a bar girl. So, I just asked if he was married. Making conversation.”

Toru’s expression shifted, his jaw tightening. Sayuri could see she had hit a nerve. “Do you think he is sexy?” he asked, the jealousy prickling in his voice.

“Well, I did notice he has a muscular body and that he dresses well,” she replied nonchalantly, her poker face unwavering.

“He spends a lot of money on clothes. He buys online from Japan. I wish I could afford that,” Toru muttered, resentment creeping into his words. Sayuri felt a thrill—she had pressed his button just right.

“You never answered my question. Is he married?” she prompted, her tone casual yet probing. Toru hesitated, visibly wrestling with his emotions. After a moment that felt stretched thin, he finally said, “No, he’s not married.”

She leaned in closer, her hand brushing against his arm, a gesture both comforting and tantalizing. “I don’t know much about him, but I’m sure he’s not as nice as you,” she said, letting the words linger, knowing she needed to keep Toru hooked.

He looked at her, the flicker of anger still in his eyes, but beneath it, she could sense a flicker of hope. The competition she had conjured between them seemed to ignite a spark in his demeanour, and she relished the control she wielded in this subtle game.

Sayuri felt invigorated as she packed her suitcase for her trip to Pattaya. Heading to Pattaya with Naomi felt like a much-needed escape. She was only leaving for Pattaya early in the morning, but she didn’t trust herself to finish everything in time. Mornings were not her forte. She was grateful that Richard had insisted on taking her to the train station the day before to buy her ticket to Bangkok—one less thing to worry about.

She had experienced love in many forms throughout her life, each affair igniting a thrilling honeymoon phase that quickly faded, leaving her yearning for the next rush. As strong as her feelings for Richard were, the reality of living together 24/7 loomed over her like a shadow.

In her mind, the thought of permanent cohabitation was suffocating. The idea of being with one person forever felt like a prison, a manifestation of her childhood trauma. She often mused that the best marriages thrived on space—where both partners had their own lives, jobs, and breathing room. That balance allowed intimacy without the stifling weight of constant togetherness. She had embraced the concept of *hikikomori* long ago and was not at all worried about being called a *make inu* – a label often applied to single women over 40. She loved her privacy. But she also enjoyed having a man around during those blissful early days of romance. Not wanting to be strictly *hikikomori*, she had decided on a compromise – a blend of solitude with romance.

When Richard had been away in the Philippines, she had managed well enough in the big house, but loneliness had crept in, especially at night. Hugging a pillow just couldn’t replicate the warmth of a man’s embrace. It was a delicate balancing act. For her, it boiled down to time management - privacy during the day, intimacy at night.

As she zipped up her suitcase, she made a mental note to tell Richard to move his desk into the lounge when she returned from Pattaya. Being in the same room with him during

the day was rarely good for her peace of mind. She liked having him around, but she didn't want him constantly in her space; like a chocolate bar in the fridge - an indulgent treat she could choose to enjoy but didn't want staring her in the face.

The previous night had been unexpectedly pleasant. Richard had suggested they buy street food for supper, a decision that allowed them to spend more quality time together before her departure. Sayuri appreciated the gesture, and it was a refreshing change from their usual routine. She had told him that while she didn't need to finish her current web design project before leaving, she really wanted to try, allowing her to spend more time with Naomi. So, she had spent the entire day glued to the chaise lounge, fingers flying over the keyboard. Richard often commented on how amazed he was at the hours she dedicated to coding, always curious about her process.

"Baby!" Richard called just before entering the room.

"Whaaat?" she replied, the irritation slipping into her tone. It had been a long, hard day, and she felt the weight of exhaustion pressing down on her.

"Do you need me to check your website for spelling?" Richard offered, his voice light and willing. He had done this for her before on her last project, and she appreciated his support.

Sayuri paused, looking at him blankly. She realized how tired, tense, and irritable she was feeling. She needed a break from the screen and the pressure of deadlines. In that moment, she decided to focus on Richard instead. With a soft smile, she purred, "OK. Later. I want to lie with you now."

"Sure! I'm happy to lie with you," Richard beamed, his expression lighting up at her change in demeanour. "Let me just go turn off the gas stove. I'm making boiled eggs for your trip tomorrow."

As he left the room, Sayuri got up and went to lie down on the bed. She took a deep breath and felt a wave of relief wash over her. The tension in her shoulders began to ease, allowing herself to be present in the moment. A few minutes later, Richard returned, a playful grin on his face, which Sayuri could not see as she lay on her back, eyes closed.

He lay down gently beside her, the soft rustle of the sheets barely disturbing the quiet of the room. As he began to massage her scalp with tender, deliberate motions, Sayuri felt her stress melt away. With her eyes still closed, a smile crept across her lips, warmth radiating from his touch.

"You have such strong hands," she purred, her voice a low, soothing melody. The sensation sent shivers down her spine, awakening a deep-seated desire within her—a longing to be loved, to be touched, and to feel safe in someone's arms. In that moment, she mused, they were just two lonely travellers finding comfort in each other's arms.

"Meow," she playfully purred again, her eyes still shut, revelling in the intimacy of the moment.

The sound had become their little secret, a flirtation that had blossomed when they discovered their shared love for cats. Whenever she was feeling affectionate, she would look at him with her big, brown, inviting eyes and softly purr, "Meow," a sign of her contentment and playfulness. He chuckled softly, his fingers pausing for a moment in surprise, then resuming their soothing rhythm.

"What a perfect little cat you are," he teased, his voice warm and rich.

Sayuri felt a light flutter in her chest, the playful banter wrapping around her like a soft blanket. She relished the simplicity of the moment, the shared laughter and the quiet connection that thrummed between them. With each gentle stroke, she felt more cherished, more at home. In their small world, it was just them, wrapped in warmth and the promise of something deeper.

CHAPTER 43

Sayuri sat on the train to Bangkok, the rhythmic clatter of the tracks providing a comforting backdrop as she gazed out the window. The landscape blurred past, a mix of green fields and distant mountains, and a sense of anticipation welled within her. She was looking forward to seeing her daughter, Naomi, who would arrive from Tokyo the next day. Naomi would be flying to the Philippines in a few days to study English during her summer break, and Sayuri couldn't wait to spend some quality time with her.

Naomi had not been a planned baby, but Sayuri loved her fiercely. She had made countless sacrifices to ensure Naomi had a decent childhood, navigating the challenges of raising her alone. The thought of their reunion filled her with warmth, even as she prepared for the meeting with Takuya looming ahead.

She needed to discuss Kaba, to close that chapter of her life and finally square things with Takuya. It felt essential to settle this before enjoying her time with Naomi in Pattaya. The knowledge that Naomi was blissfully unaware of her mother's past involvement with the Yakuza brought Sayuri a sense of relief. She was determined to keep that part of her life hidden, shielding her daughter from its complexities.

As the train sped along, Sayuri realized she had forgotten to load data onto her phone, and there was no Wi-Fi available. Forced to disconnect, she took a deep breath and allowed herself to relax. It was a rare opportunity to indulge in her book, *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami, which she had been meaning to read for ages. She flipped it open, losing herself in the prose as the train carried her toward her destination.

Hours passed, and before she knew it, the train slowed to a stop at Krung Thep Aphiwat, the new central train station in Bangkok. Sayuri stepped off, glancing around the bustling platform. While the station was modern and impressive, she preferred the old Hua Lamphong Station. It had a charm and central location that made navigating the city easier. The thought of getting to her meeting in the Khaosan Road district from here filled her with trepidation. The journey would be long and complicated, especially as evening fell. However, traveling light—just her backpack—was a small blessing. She could manage the navigation without feeling burdened.

After a brief detour to grab a bottle of water, Sayuri made her way through the throngs of people and down the stairs to the MRT. Eventually, she arrived at *Madame Muzak* bar, a trendy spot in the Khaosan Road district she had chosen for its rooftop view. Climbing the stairs, she felt a mix of excitement and nerves as she reached the top. The rooftop offered a stunning view of the Bangkok skyline, the city lights beginning to twinkle as dusk settled in. Sayuri took a moment to appreciate the atmosphere before scanning the area for Takuya. She spotted him leaning against the railing, his posture relaxed but alert.

"Konichiwa," she greeted, as she reached him.

He turned, a smile breaking across his face. "Sayuri! It's good to see you."

As they exchanged greetings, Sayuri felt the weight of the evening ahead. This meeting was crucial, and she was ready to face whatever came next. She desperately wanted to leave the shadows of her past behind her.

"Let's sit," Takuya suggested, indicating a table with an open palm hand.

"Hai!" agreed Sayuri.

A cute Thai waitress immediately appeared to take their drinks order. They both ordered Chang beers.

"How is life in Nong Pai?" Takuya asked, not wasting time on small talk.

"Quiet," was all Sayuri said.

"If you're wondering why you haven't seen Masashi around, I told him to keep a low profile why you are investigating," Takuya pre-empted.

"Well, to be honest, I suspected as much. I haven't seen him once," Sayuri replied.

"*Kanpai!*" toasted Takuya, as the beers arrived.

"*Kanpai!*" Sayuri toasted, lightly touching her beer can against Takuya's.

"So, Sayuri-chan, do you have any news for me, good or otherwise?"

"Hai!" she affirmed, smiling. "I can confirm, to the best of my knowledge, that Kaba is skimming money from the drug operation," she said.

"That is good news. How do you know that?" Takuya probed.

"Toru is in love with me," she chuckled. "I got him drunk and he told me everything, hoping to get intimate with me. I think I broke his heart," Sayuri continued. Takuya raised an eyebrow, a smirk playing at the corners of his lips.

"You have a way of getting information, don't you?" he said, leaning back in his chair, clearly amused.

Sayuri shrugged, a playful smile on her face. "Sometimes you have to play the game to win, right? Toru can be quite charming when he's had a few drinks." She took a sip of her Chang beer, savouring the coolness as it slid down her throat.

"Charming? Or just desperate?" Takuya teased, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

"Maybe a bit of both," she replied, laughter dancing in her voice. "But he did spill the beans. Apparently, Kaba has been skimming off the top for months, and Toru was not too happy about it. He is resentful that Kaba has so much money and he doesn't," explained Sayuri. Takuya nodded thoughtfully, his demeanour shifting to one of seriousness.

“That’s valuable information, Sayuri. If Kaba is taking money from the operation, I need to act. The buck stops with me,” said Takuya earnestly. “When do you return to Nong Pai,” he continued, knowing that Sayuri was going to Pattaya with Naomi for a few days.

“Saturday night,” she replied. “Why do you ask?” she asked, curiously.

“Just asking. I need to come up with a plan to deal with Kaba before you go back. Can we meet again on Saturday, before you go to the train station?” Takuya asked.

“Hai!” she replied.

“I will see if I can gather more evidence before then. We can’t act on just a drunken confession,” he replied. “But if what you say is true, it changes everything.”

“Takuya...” Sayuri started.

“Yes?” Takuya inquired.

“Please tell me that we are now square. I have done what you asked. I don’t want this ‘debt’ hanging over my head forever,” she Sayuri pleaded, making air quotes with her fingers as she said the word ‘debt’.

He looked at her, a blank expression settling over his face as he deliberated the question. For a moment, the air was thick with unspoken history and shared burdens. Then he exhaled slowly, a hint of a smile creeping in. “Ok, Sayuri-chan. I don’t suppose there is much more you can do without blowing your cover.”

With a sudden, mischievous glint in his eye, he spat into his palm and extended it toward her. Sayuri raised an eyebrow but couldn’t suppress a grin. She mirrored his action, spitting into her own hand, and they shook on it, their palms sticky yet symbolic.

“I officially call it even,” Takuya declared, a smirk on his face. “You did well, Sayuri-chan. Thank you.” His gaze locked onto hers, and for a brief moment, the world around them faded away.

In that shared silence, Sayuri could see the tumult of emotions swirling behind his eyes. Conflicted feelings danced there—gratitude, frustration, and something deeper that hinted at their complex bond forged over three decades. They were both victims of circumstance, each navigating their own labyrinths of choices and regrets. This understanding had always created a connection between them, unspoken yet palpable.

“Thank you, Takuya-San,” Sayuri replied sincerely, her voice softening. She offered him a knowing smile, one that recognized the weight they both carried. “I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”

“You’ll thank me even more in a moment,” Takuya smirked, “I have been keeping some news from you which you might appreciate.”

“Oh, is that right,” said Sayuri, intrigued.

“Yup. I’m sure you remember our ‘friend’, Tomoko?” continued Takuya, doing air quotes with his fingers.

“Tomoko!” Sayuri blurted out in shock. “That bitch! What about her?”

“I wasn’t sure if you had heard this, but she’s in prison,” continued Takuya, smiling like a Cheshire cat.

“Wow! How? Tell me all,” said Sayuri excitedly.

“It troubled me for years that she never suffered any consequences for her actions against us – you and me – so I decided to even the score.”

“What did you do?”

“I got Masashi to plant some *yaba* in her apartment in Tokyo. He managed to ‘persuade’ the building manager to help,” Takuya explained, once again using air quotes for ‘persuade’.

“What is *yaba*?” quizzed Sayuri, confused.

“Sorry, I’ve been in Thailand too long,” Takuya chuckled. “I mean methamphetamine. They call it *yaba* here.”

“Wow! What happened?” Sayuri asked in disbelief.

“Well, of course I called the police. She’s currently serving a 7-year sentence at Tokyo Women’s Prison. That will give her time to consider making better choices in her life,” Takuya said with glee.

“You don’t know how happy I am to hear that,” Sayuri confessed, feeling suddenly lighter. Her debt with Takuya had been paid in full and Tomoko had finally been punished for her actions. It was going to be a stress-free week in Pattaya!

Takuya’s smile faded slightly as he looked deep into her eyes and said, “Just remember, we’re in this together, Sayuri-chan. Always,” he said, his voice low and earnest. The barriers they had built around themselves seemed to crack momentarily and Sayuri felt that whatever the future held, she could always rely on Takuya going forward. She nodded, feeling the shared history binding them tighter.

Sayuri still felt a sense of shock and disbelief though. Despite their intense rivalry, Tomoko had never crossed any serious boundaries. Yes, she had planned the setup that ultimately led to Takuya’s scar and her pregnancy, but Sayuri didn’t believe that Tomoko could have foreseen those consequences. Or maybe she had. But, apart from shock, she also felt a flicker of vindication emerge—she had often felt overshadowed by Tomoko’s bravado and confidence.

However, despite admitting intense feelings of hatred towards Tomoko in her youth, Sayuri’s feelings now shifted toward concern. She reflected on the complexities of their rivalry and wondered about the circumstances that had led to Tomoko’s situation.

Despite their animosity, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of empathy, recognizing that everyone faces battles of their own. This revelation prompted Sayuri to reconsider her own values and perspectives on rivalry, pushing her to reflect on the true meaning of strength and resilience. *Gaman*.

Sayuri lay comfortably under the gazebo by the pool at their hotel in Jomtien Beach, the warm summer sun filtering through the slats of the roof above her. The sound of laughter and splashing water filled the air as she worked diligently on her laptop, trying to finish her last two web design projects. She could see Naomi in the pool, energetically playing with a bright beach ball, her laughter a sweet melody that made Sayuri smile despite the pressure of her tasks.

A handsome teenage boy, who spoke with a German accent, was hovering near Naomi, unable to take his eyes off the oriental water nymph. Naomi, at 20, was slightly taller than her mom. Sayuri knew it was hereditary, from Naomi's father, but she avoided talking about him at all costs. Naomi still did not know who her father was. Sayuri was glad that Naomi had inherited her good looks. Her father had a face for radio.

"What time will you be finished, Mom?" Naomi called out, her voice cheerful and light.

"Another couple of hours, Naomi-chan. Then I am all yours!" Sayuri replied, looking up from her laptop. She felt a rush of warmth as she watched her daughter, so full of life and joy.

Deciding to take a quick mental break from coding, Sayuri leaned back and allowed herself to simply observe. The sight of Naomi splashing in the water, her jet-black hair glistening under the sun, brought back memories of their journey together. It had been a long, hard road raising Naomi single-handedly, and the weight of those years settled lightly on her heart.

She recalled the day she had left Tokyo, a decision born from desperation and necessity. The city had become too dangerous and she needed to escape. On that fateful day, she had just conceived Naomi, a life growing inside her that would lead her to a new beginning. She had never told Naomi who her father was, and the question had only come once, when Naomi was ten. At that moment, Sayuri had felt the weight of her silence, but she had skillfully deflected the question, hoping to shield her daughter from a past that was painful and complicated.

Their life in Minamiboso had been relatively normal, where Sayuri worked in a ramen shop for twelve years, even foregoing sex for seven long years. She had made sacrifices to ensure Naomi had a decent upbringing, eventually moving to Yokohama so Naomi could attend a good *chugakku*. Sayuri remembered the pride she felt when Naomi excelled in school, but that pride was tinged with sadness, knowing the challenges Naomi faced as a single-parent child.

It was unusual in Japan to come from a single-parent home and Naomi had endured teasing at her international boarding school in Yokohama. Sayuri had discovered this unfortunate truth only after Naomi pulled a classic prank on one of the school bullies—the chair pull, a mischievous act that had earned her a visit to the headmistress's office. That was the first time Sayuri learned of the bullying, and her heart had ached for her daughter, as she recalled her own challenges that she had faced with Tomoko.

Yet, Naomi had faced it all with a stoicism that mirrored Sayuri's own. She embraced the concept of *Gaman*, enduring hardships with quiet strength. Sayuri admired her resilience, often wishing she could shield her from all the pain of the world, but knowing that life's challenges were part of growing up. As she watched Naomi dive into the water with a splash, Sayuri felt a swell of gratitude. Despite the struggles, they had built a life filled with love and laughter. She promised herself that once she completed her projects, she would dedicate her time fully to Naomi—a reward for both of them.

“Mom! Come join me!” Naomi shouted, her voice breaking Sayuri from her reverie.

“I will in a bit! Just a little more work, okay?” Sayuri called back, her heart lightening at the thought of swimming together later. With renewed determination, Sayuri returned to her laptop, focusing on the task at hand. She was almost done and could already envision the fun they would have together in the pool—mother and daughter, finally enjoying their time in the sun, free from the burdens of the past.

CHAPTER 44

Sayuri stood in the bustling terminal of Bangkok Airport, the vibrant energy of travellers rushing by creating a whirlwind of excitement and anxiety. She and Naomi had spent a delightful morning shopping at MBK Mall, carefully selecting summer clothes that would fit into Naomi's already stuffed bags. Each item was chosen with purpose, ensuring it wouldn't exceed her luggage weight limit. Now, with the clock ticking, Sayuri felt the weight of the day pressing down on her.

Naomi was about to fly to Cebu in the Philippines, and Sayuri was proud of her daughter's adventurous spirit and commitment to her studies. However, as they neared the security checkpoint, a pang of sadness hit her. Saying goodbye was never easy, especially after the lovely days they had shared together.

"Mom, I'll see you soon!" Naomi said brightly, a hint of nervousness in her voice as she approached the escalator that led to the restricted area.

"Hai!" Sayuri replied, forcing a smile despite the tightness in her chest. "Have fun!"

Naomi nodded, her eyes sparkling with excitement, but Sayuri could see the reluctance beneath her enthusiasm. They shared a moment, both acutely aware of the impending separation. A Thai security official waited patiently at the entrance to the escalator, which led up to the security screening area, as Sayuri and Naomi said their goodbyes. Sayuri leaned in and kissed Naomi on the cheek.

"Safe travels, Naomi-chan. I'll be thinking of you."

"Me too," smiled Naomi, offering her passport and boarding ticket to the patient lady blocking her access to the escalator. Just as Naomi was about to step onto the escalator, Sayuri quickly reached into her pocket and pulled out a surprise Snickers bar.

"Wait! Here!" she called out, her voice brightening. Naomi turned, her expression shifting from apprehension to delight. "Mom! You bought my favourite!"

"Of course! You know it's our thing," Sayuri said, holding it out like a precious token.

They both chuckled, the familiar comfort of their tradition easing the sadness of the moment. Snickers had become their unspoken sign of love, a sweet treat that conveyed affection when words sometimes fell short.

"Thanks, Mom! I'll save this for later," Naomi said, her smile wide as she took the candy. "I love you!"

"I love you too, Naomi-chan! Enjoy your trip and call me when you can!" Sayuri called after her, watching as Naomi turned back to face the escalator, the chocolate bar

clutched tightly in her hand. As her daughter disappeared into the security area, Sayuri felt a mix of pride and longing.

She missed Richard more than she thought she would, and the thought of lying in his strong arms again was a comforting anticipation. He had been so considerate during her time with Naomi, sending her only a daily text to check in, allowing her to fully immerse herself in their time together without distraction.

With a deep breath, Sayuri turned away from the escalator, forcing herself to focus on the next task at hand. She still had to meet Takuya before catching the overnight train back to Nong Pai. The day was far from over, but she held onto the warmth of their Snickers tradition, a reminder that love could be expressed in many small, meaningful ways.

Sayuri leaned against the railing of the bar rooftop, the evening breeze tousling her hair as she stared out at the twinkling Bangkok skyline. She looked at the time on her phone. It was 4pm, and the sun was turning a bright orange as it dipped towards the horizon, the air pollution acting as a colour filter, casting a reddish glow over the city. But inside her, a storm was brewing. She had just seen Naomi off at the airport, a bittersweet farewell that left her feeling both proud and vulnerable.

Now, here she was with Takuya, grappling with the decision he had taken that made her uncomfortable. Takuya had taken a few days to consider their next steps regarding Kaba, and now he had resolved to accompany her on the overnight train to Nong Pai. His decision sent a jolt of panic through Sayuri. She forced a smile, trying to maintain a facade of calm, but her heart raced beneath the surface.

“Takuya, are you sure this is a good idea?” she asked, her voice steady but laced with concern.

He turned to her, eyebrows raised. “Why not? We need to resolve this. You know that.”

Sayuri’s brain was exploding. She had never revealed to Takuya that she was living with Richard, and she had no intention of doing so. The two worlds she inhabited felt like a delicate balance, and the thought of them colliding filled her with dread. She had fought hard to build a life with Richard, one that was free from the shadows of her past, and she wasn’t about to let Takuya’s presence jeopardize that.

“It’s just... I don’t want to complicate things,” she replied, her voice softer now, almost pleading.

“Complicate things? Sayuri, this is important. We can’t let Kaba go unchecked,” he insisted, leaning closer, his intensity palpable.

A wave of frustration washed over her. “That’s not what I mean,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m living with a guy in Nong Pai. His name is Richard. I suppose you could say he is my current boyfriend. What if he finds out I’m traveling with you? He trusts me, Takuya, but this... this could push the limits of that trust.”

Takuya scoffed lightly, dismissing the concern. “You think he has any idea who I am?”

Sayuri’s heart sank. “He doesn’t need to know. I’ve kept my past from him for a reason.” She glanced away, the weight of her secret pressing down on her. Richard was a good man, and she feared he would judge her harshly if he discovered her Yakuza connections. It was a part of her life she was not proud of, and she wasn’t ready to expose him to that world.

She had deliberately ignored Richard’s earlier text, a simple “*Konichiwa baby.*” It felt safer not to engage, not to invite questions or concerns. But now, the guilt gnawed at her. What if he sensed something was off? What if he discovered she was traveling with a Yakuza boss? The very thought made her stomach turn. Sayuri took a deep breath, trying to calm the rising panic inside her. “Takuya, please understand. I can’t risk my life with Richard for this. We need to keep our worlds separate.”

“Sayuri,” Takuya said, his tone shifting to something softer. “What do you really think will happen? It’s just a train ride. We’ll handle things discreetly, and then you can go back to your life with him.”

But there was no reassurance in that. Every instinct in her screamed against it. Takuya’s presence felt like a crack in her carefully constructed facade, and she didn’t want to expose Richard to any of it.

“Takuya, I’m asking you to reconsider. I need to protect what I’ve built.”

He sighed, his expression hardening. “I can’t do this without you, Sayuri. You’re the only one who can help me navigate this.”

Inside, Sayuri felt a tempest of emotions. She was caught between loyalty to her past and the fragile future she was trying to build with Richard. As she looked out over the city, the vibrant lights flickering like her racing thoughts, she realized she was at a crossroads. She needed to make a choice—one that could change everything. Just then, her phone pinged – it was another text from Richard.

Hi baby. Are you OK? Are you still coming to Nong Pai on the overnight train?

“Kuso!” she thought to herself, as she read Richard’s text.

Sayuri stared at her phone with a mix of frustration and anxiety. Richard’s texts had been coming in steadily, each one more insistent than the last, asking if she was okay. But she couldn’t bring herself to tell Richard the whole truth; her mind was consumed with thoughts of Takuya, who was determined to travel with her on the overnight train to Nong Pai. She hated lying, but the omission of details felt like her only option. After a few minutes of deliberation, she finally typed out a response,

I will be going to the train station in an hour. It was the truth, at least in part.

Two hours later, she found herself at Bangkok’s central train station, the bustling atmosphere around her a stark contrast to the turmoil in her heart. Takuya stood beside

her, checking the train schedule, and just as she was about to breathe a sigh of relief, her phone buzzed again. It was Richard,

Hi baby. Have you bought your ticket yet?"

She knew he was aware of her last-minute approach to ticket buying and just wanted to remind her – just in case.

Hi hun-nee. Yes, I have my ticket, she replied, once again ignoring the fact that she was not alone.

As the evening wore on, she felt the familiar warmth of their nightly ritual tugging at her heart. Richard had always been attentive, especially when he was away in the Philippines and South Africa. At around 10 PM, her phone lit up again,

OK, great! Safe trip. See you in the morning. Goodnight.

OK. See you tomorrow. Goodnight, she texted back, trying to ignore the gnawing guilt in her stomach.

Half an hour later, the panic struck her like a bolt of lightning. She had forgotten to tell Richard not to come to the station to meet her! Heart racing, she quickly typed

Hi. You don't need to come to the station tomorrow. I will catch a tuk-tuk.

The moment she hit send, she felt a wave of dread wash over her. Richard's response was immediate –

Why? You only have your backpack. You can hop on the back of the scooter. No problem.

Her mind began to spin. The last thing she wanted was for him to worry. In a moment of clarity, she decided to tell him at least part of the truth,

I am not travelling alone. We will catch a tuk-tuk. It is OK.

The response was swift and laced with suspicion,

Who are you travelling with?

A Japanese man, she texted back, her heart sinking as she realized she had opened a can of worms.

Oh! And who is this Japanese man? Does he have a name? Richard's tone had shifted, and she could feel the tension crackling through the screen.

Takuya, she replied, knowing full well that this would only lead to more questions.

And what is your relationship with this man? Richard asked, his jealousy seeping through the words.

Sayuri hesitated, the weight of the moment heavy on her shoulders. She had always valued honesty, but the fear of Richard's reaction loomed larger. Taking a deep breath, she replied,

He's just a friend, Richard. I promise.

But she knew that the word "just" wouldn't carry the weight of truth she needed. The silence that followed felt like an eternity, each tick of the clock amplifying her anxiety as she awaited Richard's response.

Can I phone you? came the response a minute later.

That was possibly the worst thing he could have asked.

No. I am using Takuya's hotspot. I can't go somewhere private to talk, explained Sayuri, knowing that, even to herself, she sounded suspicious.

Well, if he is just a friend, then there should be no problem talking in front of him, Richard argued.

No. There are many other people on the train as well. It is rude and we will probably argue. I won't do that, Sayuri texted.

OK. Just tell me why he is coming to Nong Khai and where is he staying? With us?

He has friends in Nong Khai. He is not staying with us, Sayuri texted back.

Ok, baby. Sleep well. See you soon.

Goodnight hun-nee. See you tomorrow.

Sayuri took a deep breath, trying to shake off the unease that settled in her stomach. Texting Richard had felt like a small relief, but her mind began to spiral as she lay on top bunk number 45 in the sleeper carriage of the overnight train. She put herself in Richard's position - his girlfriend had been away for a week, and now she was returning with another man—a Japanese man, no less.

She could almost see him sitting on his sofa, brows furrowed, replaying their last conversation. The thought made her heart ache. He was probably wrestling with doubts, wondering if he could trust her. After all, she hadn't mentioned Takuya until now. Why would she be coming to Nong Khai with a stranger? The small town felt intimate, almost confining, and she imagined Richard thinking about how unlikely it was for a man from Japan to have friends there.

As she analysed her situation, her story began to sound more suspicious. She could hear the echoes of Richard's insecurities in her mind. Why hadn't she thought this through more carefully? She pictured him pacing, trying to piece together the puzzle of her absence and her sudden friendship with Takuya.

The thought of Richard arriving at the train station filled her with dread. The last thing she needed was for him to show up, muscles tensed, ready to protect “his property.” The idea of a confrontation made her cringe; she hated fighting and drama. She preferred clarity and calm, not the chaos that often accompanied jealousy. With every passing moment, the train's arrival felt both imminent and distant. She glanced at the clock on her phone, willing time to move faster. Soon, she would see Richard's face, and she braced herself for the myriad of emotions that would play across it. Would he be angry? Hurt? Confused?

Sayuri shook her head, trying to dispel the swirling thoughts. She had to focus on the present and what lay ahead. Whatever happened, she would have to face it. She hoped for the best but prepared for the worst. In a few more hours she would have to confront the reality waiting for her back home, no matter how complicated it might be.

The train arrived on time, its brakes squeaking as it came to a gentle stop. The doors slid open with a hiss, releasing a steady stream of passengers who poured onto the platform. Some emerged with a sense of purpose, while others paused to gather their belongings.

As Sayuri and Takuya stepped down from the train, Sayuri anxiously scanned the bustling platform for any sign of Richard. The crowd was thicker than she had anticipated, a whirlwind of activity that made it impossible to spot anyone. People rushed by, their voices blending into a cacophony of excitement and urgency, all eager to catch a tuk-tuk into town or to the Friendship Bridge.

The energy was palpable; suitcase wheels clattered against the concrete, and joyous reunions echoed in the air. Sayuri's mind was filled with thoughts of Richard, the tension from their earlier conversation still lingering. She had told him she would be taking a tuk-tuk to the Cat Mee B&B next door to Jolene's house, the same place she had stayed on the day they had met.

She climbed onto the back of one of the many waiting tuk-tuks, her backpack resting heavily on her lap. Takuya settled in opposite her, adjusting his bag with a casual ease that contrasted sharply with Sayuri's rising anxiety. Before the driver could pull away from the curb, she noticed a flurry of movement as Richard's hulking frame emerged from the crowd, his expression a mix of determination and concern. It was a moment that took her completely by surprise. Sayuri's breath caught in her throat. Richard was looking around, scanning the faces, and then locked eyes with her.

“Sayuri!” he called out, his voice cutting through the din.

Panic surged through her. She hadn't prepared for this moment, even though she knew there had been a slim chance that Richard would come to the station. Sayuri had tried to keep her two worlds separate, but now the boundaries were blurring dangerously. She was dumbstruck, unsure of how to greet him, Takuya's presence a silent weight that only amplified her embarrassment.

Richard walked towards the tuk-tuk, his brow furrowed with suspicion. Sayuri's gaze dropped, unable to meet his eyes. She didn't want to mix her personal life with her past, and Takuya's presence felt like a betrayal of everything she had built with Richard.

"Welcome back," Richard said, his voice steady but edged with tension. Sayuri could see in Richard's eyes that he was biting his tongue, trying not to say something he might regret. Sayuri opened her mouth to respond, but no words came. The silence stretched between them, thick with unspoken truths. Takuya shifted slightly, and Sayuri could sense his curiosity—he was watching Richard with an intensity that made her anxious.

"Are you ready to go home?" Richard asked, his gaze now fixed on her. "I can take you on the scooter."

"No," Sayuri replied quickly, her voice sharper than she intended. She felt Takuya's eyes on her, searching for a cue, but all she could think about was how to shield Richard from the truth. Richard's expression darkened, confusion giving way to a deeper suspicion. He glanced at Takuya, who sat casually opposite Sayuri, his face inscrutable.

With a frustrated sigh, Richard turned away, his jaw clenched. "Fine. I'll see you later," he said curtly, turning away and briskly walking to his scooter, the familiar sight of it making Sayuri's heart ache. She wanted to call out to him, to explain, but she couldn't find the words. As Richard revved the engine, Sayuri felt a wave of regret wash over her. She watched him drive off, the dust settling in his wake, leaving her with Takuya and the weight of her choices.

"Mixing these worlds can get complicated," said Takuya without expression. Sayuri said nothing. Her mind was spinning. *Was there any way to get Richard to believe her that Takuya was only a friend and nothing more?*

She looked out at the road ahead, her heart heavy with the weight of her decisions. The lines between her past and present were blurring, and she could feel the tension tightening around her. All she wanted was to protect what she had built with Richard, but now, it felt like everything was unravelling.

The tuk-tuk ride to Cat Mee was nerve-racking for Sayuri. The familiar sights of Nong Pai whizzed past in a blur, but her mind was occupied with thoughts of Richard and Takuya. The tension in the small vehicle was palpable. As they approached the B&B where Takuya was staying, she felt the tension of unspoken questions hanging in the air. The tuk-tuk came to a stop outside the driveway of the unassuming guesthouse. Sayuri jumped out first, feeling a wave of panic wash over her. She needed to placate Richard, who was understandably suspicious about her relationship with Takuya. There was no time to waste.

"I can't come with you to reception, Takuya. I really must go speak with Richard before he gets too suspicious. Okay?" she said, her voice a blend of urgency and concern.

Takuya chuckled lightly, shaking his head. "Sayuri-chan, I am an old man. I'm sure I can check in by myself. Go do what you need to do. I have your number," he replied, his tone reassuring.

"Okay, thanks. Please don't come to the house. Richard is a nice guy, but I don't know how he will react. Please!" Sayuri pleaded, her eyes wide with worry.

"Don't worry. I have enough on my plate with the Kaba issue. I will text you with an update when I have more information," Takuya assured her, his demeanour calm.

"Okay, thanks," Sayuri said, relief flooding her as she nodded.

"Jaa ne," Takuya said, giving her a small wave.

"Jaa ne," she echoed, her heart heavy as she watched him step out of the tuk-tuk.

As soon as Takuya was out of sight, Sayuri took the quickest route to Jolene's house—a narrow alleyway next to a construction site. She navigated her way through some scaffolding, her pulse quickening with the urgency of getting to Richard before he became too suspicious.

Passing the little corrugated iron shack that housed the nearest neighbours, she noticed one of the three old Thai women who lived there sitting on a tree stump eating what appeared to be sticky rice with her fingers. They were a fixture of the community, their lives woven into the fabric of the neighbourhood. She recalled reading about Thailand's efforts to support aging widows, and she felt a pang of empathy for them. The youngest of the three woke up every dawn to cycle to Boxing Road to collect empty beer bottles for recycling, just to make ends meet.

Sayuri admired their resilience; they embodied the spirit of Gaman, enduring hardship with quiet strength. Finally reaching the back door to Jolene's house, she hesitated, deciding to go around to the front, hoping Richard would be waiting for her there.

"Konichiwa!"

Sayuri jumped, startled by the unexpected greeting. She spun around to see Richard walking towards her, a smile spreading across his face as he approached.

"Come into the back door, baby," he said gently, his voice warm and inviting. "Here, let me take your backpack." He reached out, effortlessly taking the heavy bag from her shoulders.

Sayuri felt a rush of emotions as she stood there, at a loss for words. She was not used to feeling so vulnerable, rendered speechless like a deer caught in headlights. Richard's presence was calming, yet it heightened her anxiety. How could she explain the situation without revealing too much?

"Richard, I—" she began, but the words caught in her throat.

“Hey, it’s okay. You look a little shaken. Are you alright?” he asked, concern flickering in his eyes.

She nodded, trying to regain her composure. “I’m fine, just a bit overwhelmed. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t stay away. I wanted to make sure you were okay after the train ride. I was in the park across the road waiting for the tuk-tuk to arrive,” he said, his tone softening. “Let’s talk inside, alright?”

As she entered through the back door into the kitchen, Sayuri tried to calm her mind enough to figure out just how much she should reveal to Richard. She wanted to be honest with Richard, but the truth about Takuya and her past felt like a chasm she couldn’t cross without risking everything she held dear. She took a deep breath, steeling herself for the conversation to come, hoping she could navigate this delicate situation without losing Richard’s trust.

But the confrontation she was expecting never came. Richard no longer looked like a raging bull, ready to charge at Takuya. After the initial shock of learning that Sayuri was traveling with some mysterious ‘Japanese man’, his mood had softened, and now he seemed more composed. Sayuri couldn’t quite understand the sudden change in mood, but she felt a wave of relief wash over her.

“Let me take your backpack,” Richard said, his voice gentle as he moved to grab the bag she had just set down. He headed toward the bedroom, adding, “Would you like some coffee, baby?”

“Not now,” Sayuri replied instantly, her tone firm. “I really need a shower!” She started to disrobe, feeling the warmth of the moment and the comfort of being back in Richard’s space.

One of Richard’s most endearing qualities was his respect for her privacy. Most men would have lingered, watching her undress, but Richard understood her discomfort. He turned his back, stepping out of the room to give her the space she needed. Sayuri enjoyed a lovely, cool shower, letting the water wash away the tension of the day. It was refreshing, and as she emerged, she wrapped a towel around herself, feeling a sense of renewal. Now was the time to convince Richard that she was a faithful partner, even if she hated that label and preferred to think of herself as his ‘present partner.’

As she walked back into the main area, she found Richard sitting on the couch, sipping coffee while watching a BBC news report on the Russia/Ukraine war. The news was heavy, but she felt lighter, ready to shift the mood. Without saying a word, Sayuri tiptoed up behind him, her playful spirit bubbling to the surface. She duck-walked up to the back of the sofa and planted a quick kiss on his bald spot, a mischievous gesture that was her way of signalling that she was in a naughty mood. Richard turned to face her, surprise flickering in his eyes, quickly replaced by a knowing smile.

“Oh, really?” he said, amusement dancing in his voice. He set his mug down and stood, his gaze locked onto hers with an intensity that made her heart beat fast.

“Come here,” he said, his voice low and inviting as he took a step toward her. Sayuri couldn’t help but grin, feeling the familiar spark between them. She turned and led the way to the bedroom, her heart pounding with excitement.

As they entered the room, she felt a blanket of calm cover her. In that moment, the chaos of her life faded away, and all that mattered was the connection they shared. Richard followed closely, his presence a comforting reminder that despite the complexities of her world, this was a space where she could be herself—free from secrets and the weight of her past, if only for a little while.

As Sayuri lay with her head on Richard's chest, still flushed from their intimate encounter, she felt relieved. Her strategy to appease Richard had worked, at least for now. She listened to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, grateful for the reassurance it brought, yet in the back of her mind, she couldn't shake the anticipation of uncomfortable questions about Takuya that might arise soon.

“How was your time with Naomi, baby?” Richard asked, his voice low and warm, breaking the comfortable silence.

“It was great. We had a lot of time to do things together because I finished my projects quickly,” Sayuri replied, a smile spreading across her face as she thought of her daughter.

“Wonderful. What did you girls do?” Richard prodded, genuinely interested.

“Mostly swimming. I tried swimming in the sea, but the water in Pattaya isn’t clean like Phuket, so we spent more time in the pool,” she explained, her tone light.

“Did you use sunblock? You don’t seem too sunburnt,” Richard asked, his concern evident.

“Oh yes! I have to use lots of sunblock. My skin is very sensitive to the sun,” Sayuri said emphatically, a hint of pride in her voice. “And I was swimming with the sun hat you bought for me at the market,” she chuckled, recalling the playful moment they had shared while shopping.

“That’s why your skin is soft,” Richard complimented, running his fingers gently down her arm, eliciting a shiver of delight from her.

“Hai!” she replied, reverting to Japanese without thinking, the familiarity of the language comforting her.

“Do you need to sleep, baby?” Richard asked, concern lacing his voice.

“No, I am okay. I did wake up a few times, but I had enough sleep, I think,” Sayuri reassured him, appreciating his thoughtfulness.

“Shall I go shop for food for supper?” he offered, getting up slightly as if to prepare to leave.

“No. I will walk to Lotus later. I’ve been lazy for one week,” she replied, feeling a bit guilty for her lack of productivity.

“Okay, baby. I can cook if you want,” Richard suggested, his tone casual.

“No, I am going to make you a special Japanese dish tonight. You don’t know how to make it,” she laughed, realizing she had just produced a hat trick of “No” responses in a row.

Richard chuckled, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “I’m not used to you saying no to me,” he joked, raising an eyebrow.

Sayuri giggled, feeling a lightness in the air between them. “Maybe I’m just becoming more assertive,” she teased back, her heart swelling with affection for him.

“Assertive, huh? I like it,” Richard said, grinning. “But really, you don’t need to do everything yourself. I’m more than happy to help.”

She looked up at him, her expression softening. “I know, and I appreciate it. But cooking is something I love to do, especially for you.”

“Then I’ll look forward to it. Just take it easy today,” he replied, his voice gentle.

“Hai!” she said, leaning in to plant a soft kiss on his chest, feeling grateful for the moment. Yet, the nagging thoughts about Takuya lingered in the back of her mind, like shadows waiting to emerge. For now, though, she allowed herself to bask in the warmth of Richard’s presence, hoping to push aside the uncertainty for just a little longer.

CHAPTER 45

Sayuri lay back against the pillows enjoying the moment of peace when her phone pinged, breaking the silence. She reached for it, a flutter of apprehension stirring in her stomach as she saw the message from Takuya. It had been two days since she'd returned to Nong Pai with him, and this was only the second time he had reached out.

Sayuri-chan. We need to talk. Call me when you can.

Her heart pounded. Takuya had only spent his first night at Cat Mee B&B before moving to a nicer place, which was no surprise. Nong Pai wasn't exactly a tourist hotspot, and the accommodations were limited. Cat Mee was pleasant enough, but it wasn't luxurious by any means.

Like her, Takuya valued his privacy, and while he had the option to stay with other Yakuza members—like Masaru Seki, Beef's father—he preferred solitude. It allowed him to maintain a sense of distance, keeping others from getting too familiar. As the boss of the Thailand Yakuza, his aloofness was essential for maintaining the respect that came with his status.

Sayuri knew better than to ask him where he was staying. It was a delicate subject, and probing could invite complications she didn't want to deal with. Keeping her reply simple and to the point felt safest.

Ok. When and where? she typed, hitting send before she could second-guess herself.

Beyond Cafe, 6pm, came the swift reply.

OK. See you then, Sayuri agreed, her stomach tightening as she pressed send.

See you, Takuya responded.

She set the phone down, her mind racing with thoughts. What could Takuya want to discuss? She hoped it wouldn't involve her relationship with Richard, but she couldn't shake the feeling that it might. The weight of her dual life pressed down on her, and the thought of having to navigate another conversation about Takuya made her anxious. Glancing at the clock, she realized she had several hours before their meeting. Sayuri took a deep breath, trying to push down the unease. She needed to stay focused on the task at hand—preparing the special Japanese dish she had promised Richard. Cooking always calmed her, grounding her in the present moment. As she moved to the kitchen, she reminded herself that she could handle whatever Takuya wanted to discuss. After all, she had come this far, balancing both worlds. But deep down, she knew that the conversation ahead would not be easy.

Sayuri finished cooking supper, the enticing aroma of her special Japanese dish wafting through the small kitchen. It was nearly 6 PM, and while she loved the anticipation of

sharing a meal with Richard, they usually didn't eat before 8. She felt a swell of anxiety in her stomach; she needed to meet Takuya, but the thought of it made her uneasy.

"Hun-nee," she purred, stepping into the lounge where Richard was busy checking his emails at his desk, which had been moved into the living area. The soft glow of the laptop illuminated his focused expression.

"Yes, dear?" Richard replied absentmindedly, still absorbed in the screen.

"I'm going for a walk along the river. The sunset is in 30 minutes, and I want to watch it go down. I'll be back before supper, okay?" she said, trying to sound casual.

By now, Richard understood how much Sayuri appreciated her 'alone time' and didn't press her to join. He often got lost in the world of his laptop, reading every bit of news he could find, his curious nature driving him to know everything about everything.

"Sure, baby. Enjoy your walk," he said, briefly turning to smile at her before returning his attention to the screen.

Sayuri nodded, feeling a mixture of relief and guilt as she slipped out the door. The evening air was warm, and the sun hung low in the sky, an orange ball of fire. She took a deep breath as she walked toward Beyond Cafe, her heart racing with apprehension. Interactions with Takuya had always been complicated, fraught with unspoken tensions and the weight of her secrets.

It was only a ten-minute walk, but each step felt heavy with anticipation. As she approached the cafe, she spotted Takuya seated in the far corner, a strategic choice that allowed him to keep an eye on the entrance while avoiding any surprises from behind. He looked calm and composed; his posture relaxed but alert.

Sayuri paused outside for a moment, gathering her thoughts. This meeting could very well change everything. With a determined breath, she pushed open the door and stepped inside, scanning the room for Takuya's gaze. When their eyes met, he offered a slight nod, indicating she should join him.

"Sayuri-chan," he greeted her, his tone neutral but his eyes sharp. "Thank you for coming."

"Of course," she replied, sliding into the chair opposite him. The ambiance of the cafe was cozy, but she knew storm clouds were coming.

"What did you want to discuss?" asked Sayuri anxiously.

"I have some news concerning Kaba," Takuya began, his tone serious.

"OK," Sayuri replied, bracing herself.

"I went to the warehouse today and had a meeting with him. He was surprised to see me. I normally let him know before I arrive in Nong Pai. He looked very nervous," Takuya continued, his gaze steady and unwavering.

“And?” she pressed, the suspense gnawing at her. She needed to know what was happening; the Kaba affair had dragged on for too long, and she wanted it resolved once and for all.

“I decided to ask him directly if he is skimming money so that I could look into his eyes to see if he replied truthfully or not. He denied it, of course, but I could tell he was lying,” Takuya said, his voice low.

“What happened?” Sayuri’s eagerness was palpable now; she leaned in closer, desperate for more details.

“I got Kato and Hiroto to lock him in the walk-in freezer. He is still there,” Takuya continued, his expression unreadable.

“So, what now?” Sayuri asked, her heart racing at the implications of his words.

“Well, I wanted to tell you that I am going to interrogate him after this meeting. I wanted to tell you face to face that things are about to get messy. Of course, your name will be kept out of it, but Nong Pai is a small place, and after tonight, it might not be safe for you,” Takuya stated, his seriousness cutting through the dim ambiance of the cafe.

“I’m happy here,” Sayuri shot back stubbornly. “I have a man who loves me and a big house by the river.”

Takuya leaned back in his chair, studying her intently. He was silent for a moment, taking ten seconds that felt like an eternity. Finally, he spoke, “Sayuri-chan, sooner or later, Toru and maybe some of the others will put two and two together and figure out that you were spying on Kaba. There is no telling what they might do. Nobody likes a spy.”

Sayuri took a deep breath, the weight of his words settling heavily on her shoulders. She processed what he was saying, her mind racing with the implications. Then, feeling defeated, she replied, “I have never been much of a spy, have I?” Her gaze drifted to the scar on Takuya’s face, a stark reminder of her past actions that had indirectly caused him pain when she had been spying for Ken Watanabe in the Mitsui-kai casino.

Takuya’s eyes softened slightly, but the weight of their shared history hung in the air like a spectre. “You’ve done what you had to do to survive,” he replied, his voice gentler now. “But survival isn’t enough anymore. You need to think of your future.”

“I don’t want to leave,” she whispered, the vulnerability in her words palpable.

“I know. But sometimes, staying means risking everything,” Takuya said, his tone firm but understanding. “You have a chance at a new life with Richard. Don’t let this world drag you back down.”

Sayuri felt a knot form in her stomach. There was no way Richard would be able to leave Nong Pai with her and even if he could, the only way she could convince him was to tell him everything – right from the beginning of her involvement with the Yakuza when still at school. The prospect of leaving everything behind was terrifying, but the thought of being caught in the crossfire of Yakuza politics was even worse. She looked into Takuya’s

eyes, searching for answers, for reassurance, but all she found was the harsh reality of her situation.

“Think about it, Sayuri. I need you to prioritize your safety above all else,” Takuya said, his voice steady. “You matter to me, and I don’t want to see you hurt.”

The gravity of his words hung between them as she nodded slowly. She understood the stakes now, and the choices ahead felt heavier than ever. *Why can’t I just be happy?* she thought. *Why does everything always fall apart?* she despaired. *Snap out of it Sayuri Ichikawa!! Gaman!*

“How much time do you think I have before I have to leave,” Sayuri asked, once more focused on practicalities and once more burying her feelings.

“It’s hard to say, a week at the most, I would guess,” answered Takuya.

“OK. Thank you for the warning, Takuya,” she said, a small sigh of resignation escaping her lips.

She was struggling with the urge to shout at him. To tell him that he was bad luck. To tell him that it was his fault that her life had been so hard. But that wasn’t true. Self-inflicted. That’s what it was. She had made the choices – not Takuya. She had nobody to blame but herself. She was just another *futoko* who had self-sabotaged her own life.

“Sayuri-chan,” Takuya said softly, placing his hand on hers, “I feel I should take some responsibility for this situation, so I will do what I can to help you with a job and accommodation moving forward.”

“Thank you, Takuya, but before I do anything, I need to discuss this with Richard.”

The sound of Richard’s name startled Takuya. “What does he know about your involvement with the Yakuza. I sincerely hope you have never told him,” Takuya said, visibly worried.

“No. Nothing. I promise. Yes, he was angry the other day at the train station but he recovered quickly. He hasn’t asked any questions. And, of course, I’m not volunteering information,” Sayuri rattled off quickly, wanting to placate Takuya.

“OK, good,” said a visibly relieved Takuya.

“Takuya, I promise not to involve the Yakuza in any conversation I have with Richard, but I still need to have a conversation with him. I know there was never going to be a fairytale ending – I’m wiser than that – but I thought, for once, I could have a comfortable relationship with a nice guy for 6 months or so,” Sayuri said.

“Fine. Talk to your man. I will text you with an update tomorrow,” Takuya decided. “And stay at home. Nobody knows where you live. Keep it that way. OK?”

“Hai!” Sayuri agreed.

Sayuri stepped through the front door of the house, still shocked by the conversation with Takuya at Beyond Cafe. The prospect of leaving Nong Pai was heavy on her shoulders, and the thought of leaving Richard behind churned in her stomach like a storm.

“Hi, baby!” Richard greeted her cheerfully as she entered. “How was your walk?”

“Fine,” she replied, trying to force a smile, but it felt brittle and unconvincing. Richard’s keen eyes caught the subtle shift in her demeanour, and concern flickered across his face.

“Are you feeling OK?” he asked, standing up from his desk and moving toward her. She was staring blankly at the TV, the images swirling together in a meaningless haze.

“Hai!” she snapped out of her reverie, taking his hand in hers. The warmth of his touch sent a jolt through her, but it also intensified the turmoil inside her. She led him toward the bedroom, her mind racing with conflicting thoughts.

“Take your pants off,” she said, her voice steady despite the chaos in her mind.

Richard raised an eyebrow, a playful smirk forming on his lips. Richard gave her a mock salute before complying with her instruction, but there was a glimmer of concern in his eyes. She needed to feel connected to him, to anchor herself in the moment. As he complied, she felt a rush of urgency.

As Richard stepped out of his pants, his expression shifted to one of curiosity as he watched her. “What’s going on, Sayuri?” he asked, his voice softening. “You seem... different.”

“I’m fine,” she repeated, but the words felt hollow. She stepped closer, wrapping her arms around his waist, pressing herself against him. The feel of his muscular body was comforting, grounding her amidst the swirling chaos in her mind.

“Are you sure? You can talk to me,” he said, brushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear. She could see the sincerity in his eyes, but how could she explain what was happening without revealing too much? Instead, she leaned in, capturing his lips with hers, trying to drown out the nagging thoughts. For a moment, the kiss felt like an escape, a brief reprieve from the looming decisions that awaited her. But as they broke apart, the weight of her situation crashed back down. She pulled away slightly, looking into his eyes, searching for reassurance.

“I just... I need you right now,” she said softly.

Richard nodded, his expression softening as he cupped her face in his hands.

“I’m here for you, whatever it is,” he promised.

Sayuri took a deep breath, the conflicting emotions swirling within her. She knew she had to make a choice soon, but for now, she wanted to lose herself in the moment, to forget the storm brewing outside their little sanctuary—if only for a while.

"No more talking," Sayuri instructed softly, as she stripped naked. "Lie down," she said robotically, her mind not quite focused in the present.

Richard obeyed, silently, easing his bulk onto the creaky bed and lying on his back expectantly. She placed a hand on his rising manhood, her small hand amplifying its size, like some Indian rope trick.

Sayuri and Richard lay on their backs panting from their exertions.

"I never slept with anyone when you were in Philippines or South Africa," Sayuri blurted - out of the blue. She wanted Richard to know that she was a faithful partner and that he was more than just a living dildo. Japanese diplomacy.

"I am happy to hear that," Richard commented. "I also never had sex with anyone."

It was a sensitive subject, and one that Sayuri did not want to dwell on. She would know tomorrow if she had to leave Nong Pai, but, until then, she was not going to say anything prematurely. But it did seem like a good time to tell Richard that she could be trusted. Not that they expected to live happily ever after. No. It was mutually understood that their union would last less than a year, and possibly even less than six months.

All relationships evolved, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Apart from Ken Watanabe, Sayuri had never given any man a time enough to get completely comfortable in a relationship. Cut and run was her *modus operandi*. She knew that, like so many other situations in life, fear was the catalyst that prevented her from following her heart. She rolled onto her side, gave Richard a peck on the lips and announced, "I go shower now," climbing over Richard's prostrate form and duck-walking out of the room, her perfectly bun-shaped glutes jiggling as she left.

Once showered and dressed, Sayuri walked back into the bedroom, finding Richard still sprawled on the bed, scrolling through his phone. "Are you hungry, hun-nee?" she asked, leaning against the doorframe.

"I can wait a bit. I'm relaxing. It's not 8 o'clock yet. Do you want to eat now?" he replied, glancing up with a smile.

"I'm going to take the scooter to 7 Eleven quickly, okay?" Sayuri said, her tone rhetorical. "We can eat when I get back."

"That's fine, baby. See you just now," Richard said, flashing her a grin.

Fifteen minutes later, she returned, a 6-pack of beer clutched in one hand and a plastic bag heavy with something inside the other.

“I’m back!” she announced, noticing Richard had showered and was now sitting at his desk, peering intently at his laptop screen.

“Hello, baby,” he greeted her, his eyes lighting up at the sight of the beers. “Did you buy me a present?” he joked.

“Hai!” she replied, smiling brightly as she waltzed past him towards the kitchen.

“Yay!” Richard exclaimed playfully; his excitement infectious.

Sayuri placed the beers in the fridge before starting to warm up the food she had prepared earlier in the day. Taking a container roughly the size of a tube of Pringles out of the second bag, she carried it to the small table in the 'dressing room' next to the bathroom and began to unpack it. Richard, drawn by her activity, wandered into the room.

“What are you unpacking?” he asked, leaning over her shoulder.

Sayuri pulled out five pieces of bright red plastic, each oddly shaped and unfamiliar. Richard squinted, trying to make sense of it. “What is it?” he finally asked, unable to contain his curiosity.

“It’s supposed to be a bong,” Sayuri replied, looking puzzled. “How does it work?” She turned to Richard, her brow furrowed in concentration.

Richard burst into laughter. “How would I know?” he said, shrugging his shoulders, a bemused smile spreading across his face.

Sayuri struggled with the assembly for about ten minutes, her frustration growing as the pieces refused to fit together. Richard eventually asked, “Do you want help?”

“Yes, please,” she said, exasperated, handing him a few of the pieces.

Richard took a look, attempting to fit them together. “Okay, but there are two pieces here that I have no idea where to put,” he admitted, scratching his head.

“I go back to shop,” Sayuri said, giving up and shoving the pieces into a shopping bag.

Richard chuckled, shaking his head. “Okay, baby. Good luck!”

Sayuri rolled her eyes playfully but couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of it all.

“I’ll ask if they can show me how to use it,” she mused, already imagining the confused look on the shopkeeper’s face. As she grabbed her keys and headed back out, Richard called after her, “Don’t forget the weed!”

“That was delicious, baby,” Richard complimented Sayuri as he set his chopsticks down on the table. A satisfied smile spread across his face. “You deserve a Michelin star,” he added, wiping his mouth with a paper napkin.

“What is Michelin star?” Sayuri quizzed, tilting her head slightly, intrigued.

“Only the best chefs in the world get a Michelin star,” Richard explained, leaning back in his chair. “It’s French, I think.”

“Oh! Thank you, hun-nee,” Sayuri replied, her cheeks warming with pride. She loved when he appreciated her cooking.

Richard began to pile the empty plates, preparing to take them through to the kitchen, as he always did, but Sayuri stopped him with a gentle hand on his thigh.

“Leave the dishes. Relax,” she suggested, her voice soft but firm.

“Okay, baby. You’re the boss,” he joked, a playful grin lighting up his face.

“Hai!” she laughed, enjoying the light hearted banter. “Remember that!”

Richard picked up the remote control from the table, glancing at her expectantly. “What do you want to watch?”

“Anything,” she replied, standing up. “You watch. I will be back in one minute, okay?” With that, she slipped out of the lounge.

A minute later, she returned, her expression bright. In her hands, she held the now properly assembled bong and two ice-cold beers. Richard’s eyes widened with curiosity.

“You are spoiling me tonight,” he commented, a hint of amusement in his voice.

Sayuri laughed, feeling a rush of excitement. “Just a little fun for us!” She set the beers down on the table, popping one open and handing it to Richard before taking a seat beside him.

Richard took a sip, his brow raised in playful disbelief. “I never thought I’d see you with a bong.”

“I’m adventurous,” Sayuri replied, her voice teasing. “And besides, you said you liked to smoke socially.”

“True,” he admitted, a smile creeping across his face. “But I’m more of a ‘one puff and I’m done’ kind of guy.”

“The One Hit Wonder,” Sayuri echoed, giggling at the nickname he had mentioned before. “Perfect for you!”

As Richard settled back on the couch, the remote still in hand, Sayuri felt her tension dissipate. This was what she wanted; this moment of connection, laughter, and shared

experiences. She watched as he prepared the bong, a mix of excitement and nervousness bubbling inside her.

“Are you ready for this?” he asked, a mock-seriousness in his tone.

“Always!” she replied, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

With a playful wink, Richard took a deep puff, and as he exhaled they both knew they were about to dive into an evening filled with laughter, relaxation, and a touch of adventure. The worries of the outside world faded into the background for the moment, replaced by the comforting presence of each other. *He’s in for a shock*, Sayuri thought as she took a long pull on the bong Richard had now handed to her.

When her best friend, Aya had found out about Sayuri’s weed habit, she had disowned Sayuri, telling her, “Sayuri-chan, I love you dearly, but I cannot be friends with a weed smoker. Not after what happened to Hana.”

At the time, Sayuri had been living with Ken Watanabe and hanging out in nightclubs. Smoking weed was a thing that she had told herself was less dangerous than alcohol, and not addictive. Hana had also started with weed, but had graduated to methamphetamine once she had built up a tolerance to it. At first, Hana had become more outgoing and sociable, often being the life of the party. But, as her meth habit worsened, she became thin and paranoid, sometimes suffering hallucinations. Despite Aya’s constant support and friendship, Hana continued to use and had collapsed and died from a brain aneurysm while walking to school with Aya.

Aya’s friendship ‘ultimatum’ had made Sayuri reconsider her choices and she had sworn to herself that she would quit. She had – eventually – but not until that fateful day when Shinji had limped into the massage parlour where she had been working for Ken.

But tonight, she was as stressed as she had ever been in Tokyo, and felt that if she didn’t smoke some weed to calm down, she might have a meltdown. She felt a mix of excitement and anxiety bubbling inside her as she sucked hard on the bong. *Well, I did quit for 20 years*, she thought, as she exhaled a column of white smoke, trying to rationalise her decision to start smoking weed again.

The bong, with its bulky shape, was foreign to her; she had previously only smoked ready-made joints, which the local weed shop did not stock. Richard was beside her, his relaxed demeanour a comforting presence. He took a sip from his beer, then grinned at her, his eyes sparkling with encouragement.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, knowing that Sayuri had not used a bong before.

She could feel the tension in her shoulders, the weight of her worries creeping back in. The conversations with Takuya still haunted her thoughts, but she was determined to push them aside for now.

“Hail!” she lied, taking a long swig of her beer.

“I know I will regret this,” Richard said as he took his second hit on the bong, the smoke swirling around him before he exhaled, a plume of white that danced in the air. “I apologise in advance,” he joked.

“I don’t understand,” Sayuri said, taking the bong from him.

“I am saying sorry now before I do anything stupid,” he explained. I normally don’t remember anything after smoking weed.

“Ok, I understand, I will say sorry too,” she laughed.

Sayuri’s fingers trembled slightly as she brought it to her lips. She inhaled cautiously, feeling the smoke fill her lungs, then immediately, began to cough.

“Take another sip of beer,” Richard suggested.

After a couple more hits, Sayuri began to feel the effects wash over her like a spring tide. All the tension in her shoulders had now melted away, replaced by a warm, fuzzy sensation. Colours seemed to pop a little more, and the world felt softer, as if wrapped in a cozy blanket.

“Not so bad, right?” Richard said, his voice smooth and soothing.

“It’s nice,” she admitted, a smile spreading across her face. “I feel... lighter.”

“Good!” He leaned back, stretching his arms behind his head. “Just relax and enjoy it. We can watch something funny if you want.”

Sayuri nodded, not trusting her voice in the state she was in. She had never mentioned to Richard how horny she got when high, thinking that the occasion would never arise. She had not expected to fall off the wagon after 20 years, but her nerves were on a knife edge and she couldn’t think of an alternative. As she lay next to Richard on the couch, she began to see lines of colourful wallpaper marching through her mind, their neon colours flickering and morphing like some psychedelic kaleidoscope. She knew that if she didn’t get up off the couch now, she would be stuck there the whole night.

“Come!” Sayuri ordered, standing up suddenly and grabbing Richard’s free hand forcefully.

“OK boss,” Richard capitulated, a knowing look on his face. He looked stoned; a silly grin plastered across his face and his eyelids drooping.

Sayuri was determined not to waste the buzz of her newfound relaxation. Laughter bubbled between them as they stumbled toward the bed, the effects of the weed making their movements feel lighter, almost as if they were floating.

“Careful now,” Richard chuckled, reaching for Sayuri’s hand as they approached the edge of the bed. She smiled back at him, her cheeks flushed, the moment feeling playful and intimate. As they both attempted to lie down gently, their bodies collided in a clumsy embrace. Sayuri giggled, losing her balance as Richard tried to guide her down,

their limbs tangling together in a comical dance. The bed creaked beneath them, creating a symphony of wood and laughter.

“Whoa!” Sayuri exclaimed, her voice a mix of surprise and delight.

“Not quite the graceful landing I had in mind,” Richard joked, his laughter infectious as they both tumbled onto the mattress in a heap.

In the midst of their laughter, a sudden snap echoed through the room. One of the wooden slats in the pine bed broke under the pressure of their combined weight, sending a jolt through the frame. Richard’s eyes widened in disbelief as he looked down at the bed.

“Oh no! We’ve broken the bed!” he exclaimed, unable to contain his laughter.

Sayuri burst into giggles, her laughter ringing out like music. “This is not how I imagined our evening going!” she said, playfully swatting at him.

“Just our luck, right?” he replied, still chuckling as he tried to prop himself up on one elbow. “I guess I have a new woodworking project now,” he joked.

With the broken slat a minor setback, they settled back into the moment, laughter slowly fading. The world outside faded away, leaving them wrapped in a bubble of joy, and the simple pleasure of each other’s company.

Richard and Sayuri leaned toward each other, their eyes locking with a mix of anticipation and warmth. As their lips met, the world around them seemed to fade away. The kiss was tender at first, a gentle exploration, but it quickly deepened into something more fervent. Their breaths mingled, and the urgency of their feelings ignited a fire between them. Richard’s hands cradled Sayuri’s face, drawing her closer, running his fingers through her hair, pulling her into the embrace. The kiss was a dance of passion and connection, filled with unspoken promises and the thrill of shared intimacy, leaving them both breathless and yearning for more.

CHAPTER 46

Sayuri lay in bed the next morning, the soft morning light filtering through the curtains. She reflected on the previous night, a whirlwind of passion and laughter that had left her both exhilarated and content.

Richard's expression flashed in her mind—his surprise and delight as she took control of the evening, guiding their movements with a confidence she hadn't fully realized she possessed. It was a shock that felt good, a pleasant surprise that had ignited a spark between them. A spark that had raged into a fire that not even Richard's hose was going to extinguish without prolonged effort. She smiled to herself, feeling empowered by the memory, grateful for the connection they shared and curious about where this newfound dynamic might lead them in the future. If there was a future. She was beginning to doubt it.

Being sexually assaulted by the woman he loved was surely a pleasant surprise for Richard she guessed. He had never seen that side of her before - dominant and completely in control. Growing up in patriarchal Japan had groomed her into becoming an obedient and agreeable woman in the bedroom, never daring to say no. Compliance was expected, which was why the number of reported rapes in Japan was so low. A woman's role was predetermined and any deviation from that role was frowned upon. It also didn't help that most of the judges in Japan were men. Getting convicted of rape was almost impossible in Japan. The one time it had happened to her, she had known better than to report it, for various reasons. But now she was in Thailand, away from the constricting traditions that still controlled every aspect of Japanese culture.

Sayuri smiled to herself as memories of their 'midnight feast' flooded her mind, a delightful flashback that warmed her heart. She had planned ahead, stocking up for an assortment of chocolates during her beer run to 7 Eleven the night before. The thought of Richard's surprised expression when she unveiled her stash made her grin wider. Yet, a twinge of guilt crept in as she recalled her constant reminders to him about cutting out white bread, sugar, and certain carbs. How could she preach moderation when, in moments of indulgence, she devoured every chocolate in sight?

As she lay there, she couldn't quite remember if they had cleared the coffee table before finally succumbing to exhaustion, both of them purring with contentment. Her thoughts drifted to the assortment of Pooky chocolate-covered breadsticks she had brought home—her absolute weakness. She had bought one of each flavour, along with an armful of Snickers and Kit Kats. Japan's love affair with Kit Kat was well-known, and she had relished the variety available, far more than in any other country.

I will have to go for a long walk today, she thought, mentally scolding herself for giving in to all her vices in one night. But then a smile spread across her face again as she recalled the laughter, the shared moments, and the warmth of Richard's embrace. *It was worth it*, she mused, feeling a glow of satisfaction as she revelled in the many pleasures of the night before. The memories danced in her mind like sweet confections, a reminder

of the joy they had found together, and she couldn't help but feel grateful for the experience.

But now a new day had dawned and as she lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, her mind swirled with anxiety. The reality of her situation pressed down on her like a heavy blanket: she might have to leave Nong Pai much sooner than she had anticipated. The thought filled her with dread, and she found herself bracing for the next promised text from Takuya, the one that could change everything.

Memories of past fears flickered in her mind—like the bullying she had endured from Tomoko in school, the feeling of helplessness creeping back. But even that didn't compare to the terror she had felt the night Shinji appeared at the massage parlour.

She glanced over at Richard, who lay beside her, snoring gently with his back turned. The soft sound was oddly comforting. She knew he was positioned that way for two reasons: he was self-conscious about his smoker breath and even more so about what he called his 'sleeping face.' He had shared with her that he had played rugby for many years, and his nose had been broken three times. Not only did it exacerbate his snoring, but it also caused him to dribble slightly in his sleep.

Sayuri smiled to herself, appreciating his thoughtfulness even in slumber. Richard was always considering others, a kindness she had never encountered before. Yet, beneath his affable demeanour lay a strength she sensed but had never witnessed firsthand.

He was the epitome of the adage: "Talk softly—but wield a big stick." The thought of that hidden capacity for violence both intrigued and reassured her. It made her feel safe, knowing he could protect her - if necessary, even if it meant relinquishing her independence.

But right now, she felt the weight of uncertainty settle in. She needed to find a way to balance her fears with the growing connection she had with Richard. As she lay there, she resolved to savour the moments they had left together, no matter what Takuya's message might bring.

Sayuri's phone pinged, pulling her from her thoughts. She glanced at the screen—Takuya's name flashed ominously.

Konichiwa. I'm at Cat Mee. I'm sitting under the gazebo. I need to meet you urgently. Can you come now?

A chill ran down Sayuri's spine. It was happening. The worst had happened. She felt a knot in her stomach, heavy and unyielding. The world around her seemed to blur for a moment, and she took a deep breath to centre herself. How strange life was. When she was young, she had made choices that felt liberated yet reckless. Now, with years behind her, it seemed as if the universe conspired against her, stripping away her options until she was left with none. Regret coiled tightly around her heart, but she

pushed it aside. Now was not the time for lamentation. *Gaman*, she reminded herself, her mantra of endurance. She took a deep breath, willing her mind to clear.

Give me 10 minutes, she texted back, sending the message into the void.

As she slipped on her jacket, the weight of her decision pressed heavily on her shoulders. She knew she had to face whatever awaited her at Cat Mee. She needed a story for Richard. She didn't want to lie, so she decided to tell a half-truth.

"Hun-nee," she purred, going over to Richard's desk. He looked tired, but happy.

"Yes, dear," he said. It was something he liked to say when he thought Sayuri was about to lecture him about his eating habits or some other arbitrary thing – like leaving the bathroom door open.

"Please don't get upset, but Japanese-man is next door at Cat Mee. He needs to talk to me. It is very urgent," she said sweetly, as she stood behind Richard's chair and massaged his shoulders, feeling his muscles tense instantly.

"Do you know what it is about?" Richard asked, genuinely concerned.

"Yes. When we were on the train, I mentioned that I have no web design projects at the moment and he said that he might be able to get me a job," Sayuri explained.

"Oh! I didn't know that you were looking for another job," Richard said, looking annoyed that Sayuri had kept that information from him.

"Well, I am still looking for web design jobs online, but I haven't found one yet. Let me go see what he has to say and then we can discuss it, OK?" Sayuri suggested.

"Ok, baby," Richard conceded.

"Thank you hun-nee," Sayuri purred, kissing Richard on his bald spot. "I should be back in 30 minutes," she made sure to mention, not wanting to arouse Richard's suspicions. "See you."

"OK. See you just now," Richard said, his eyes soulful.

With a quick glance in the mirror, she steeled herself for the confrontation ahead. Choices might have been taken from her, but she wouldn't let fear dictate her actions now. Each step down the path toward Cat Mee felt like a step deeper into a world she had tried to escape, but there was no turning back. Only forward.

Takuya was sitting at a long wooden table under the garden gazebo of Cat Mee, when Sayuri arrived, her expression serious. She took a seat opposite him, positioning herself to keep an eye on the path, being acutely aware that Richard was still suspicious about her relationship with Takuya. So far, he hadn't acted dramatically, but she wanted to avoid any surprises.

"Sayuri-chan, you have a problem. Kaba is dead and—" Takuya began, but Sayuri cut him off mid-sentence as soon as her brain processed the verbal nuke he had just delivered.

"Wait! Before you continue, tell me what happened! Yesterday, you said you were going to interrogate him..."

She paused, glancing around to ensure they were alone before leaning in closer, her voice dropping to an angry whisper. "...and now he's dead!"

"Give me a chance. I will explain everything," Takuya said calmly, his demeanour steady as he sought to de-escalate the situation.

"OK. Sumimasen," Sayuri replied softly, taking a deep breath and regaining her composure.

"Yes, we did interrogate Kaba. He tried to blame the Chinese partners, but they were the ones who told me they suspected him in the first place. And—" Takuya continued, but Sayuri raised her hand to silence him, her eyes narrowing.

"How do you know that you can trust the Chinese?" she pressed, leaning forward, her intensity palpable.

Takuya hesitated, his words faltering. "Yes, I thought about that too, but I can't think of a motive for them wanting Kaba dead. He's very good at his job. He just got greedy. He gave into temptation," he explained, trying to maintain his composure.

"OK. I don't know anything about the drug operation, so I can't comment, but I trust you, Takuya," Sayuri conceded, though her eyes still carried a flicker of doubt.

"Try not to interrupt," Takuya advised, a slight annoyance creeping into his tone. He wanted to lay out the facts without her interjections complicating the narrative.

Sayuri nodded, the heaviness of the situation pressing down on her. She could feel the tension between them, the unspoken fears and the urgency of the moment. As Takuya prepared to continue, she braced herself for the revelations that could change everything.

"I will tell you what happened, if you want..." Takuya continued, "...but it will make you uncomfortable. Are you sure, Sayuri-chan?"

"Hai!" she answered determined to know, as it was the reason her life was about to be turned upside down.

"Kato and Hiroto were doing the interrogation. Kaba was tied to a chair, you know, like you see in the movies, and they beat him with plastic bottles filled with water. It's usually quite an effective method. He shouted at us to stop and said that he would tell us all. But then he blamed the Chinese partners, which I don't buy. So - this is the squeamish part - we force fed him dry dog poo," Takuya continued, watching Sayuri

closely to see her reaction. She was just about to shout out when Takuya raised his hand, motioning her to be quiet.

“He started choking, then he had what appeared to be a heart attack, but nobody present was prepared to give him mouth to mouth. Kato tried pumping his chest, but he died,” Takuya finished.

Sayuri sat in stunned silence, her mind racing to process Takuya's words. The horror of what he had just described churned in her stomach, and she felt an overwhelming urge to scream and shout at him. But they were in a public place, and she knew she had to keep her composure. Instead, she stared at Takuya for a long, tense moment, searching his face for any sign of reassurance.

Finally, she managed to choke out, “What now?”

“He will be dumped in the river tonight,” Takuya replied matter-of-factly, his tone chillingly calm.

“No, I mean, how does it affect me? Do I need to leave still?” Sayuri asked, her voice trembling slightly as she hoped against hope that Takuya would say no.

He hesitated, his expression shifting to one of concern. “I don’t know if you noticed, but Kaba has a loyal crew—the guys who run the logistics in Laos. I don’t know what they will do if they suspect that someone ratted on Kaba. Do you remember what happened to Junko Furuta?” Takuya asked, locking eyes with her.

“Hai! I was 13 when that happened. It was disgusting. Barbaric,” Sayuri replied, her voice laced with anger and revulsion as she recalled the horrific details of the case. The memory of what happened to Junko made her almost spit with hate, a visceral reaction that underscored the gravity of their conversation.

“Well, just keep that in mind when you decide whether you want to leave Nong Pai or not,” Takuya urged, his face serious. “I strongly advise you to consider leaving—the sooner, the better.”

Sayuri felt her heart race as the weight of Takuya's warning settled over her like a dark cloud. She could feel the walls of her world closing in, the safety she had found in Nong Pai now feeling precarious. “But I have Richard to think about,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper, fear creeping in.

Takuya nodded, his expression softening slightly. “You need to protect yourself first, Sayuri-chan. If things escalate, it won’t just be you at risk. You have to be ready for anything. But there is one more thing I need to tell you before discuss anything with Richard.”

“What is that?” she enquired, hoping that it was good news for a change.

Takuya leaned forward, his tone shifting to one of urgency. “The Chinese partners also run some scam centres in Cambodia. They’ve offered you a job, partly because you’re in

danger and partly because you speak both English and Japanese. It's rare to find someone with your language and IT skills who is willing to work in a scam centre."

Sayuri's brow furrowed at the idea.

"What is the pay?" she asked, curiosity piqued despite the unsettling nature of the offer.

"Two thousand five hundred US dollars a month," Takuya replied, his gaze steady on her.

For Sayuri, that was big money—an amount that could significantly ease her financial burdens, help pay for Naomi's studies, and support her mother. The thought swirled in her mind, but she said nothing, her silence heavy with contemplation. Takuya could see her mulling it over, the gears in her head turning as she weighed the pros and cons.

"You can start anytime," he continued, trying to 'sell' the idea to her, "but as I said, the sooner the better. I'll even come with you. They're prepared to fly you from Udonthani to Phnom Penh whenever you want. You have much sought-after skills. And you'll be safe in the compound."

"Compound?" Sayuri quizzed.

"Yes, they work in self-contained compounds. All accommodation and facilities are in the compounds. Including a food court," Takuya explained.

Sayuri took a deep breath, the reality of the situation sinking in. The promise of financial security was enticing, but the moral implications of working in a scam centre gnawed at her conscience. "What kind of work would I be doing?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Basic IT support, managing communications, things like that. You'd be able to use your skills. And it's a chance to get out of here, away from the danger," Takuya explained, his tone earnest.

She looked down at the wooden table, the grains of the wood blurring as her thoughts raced, feeling a pang of guilt at the thought of leaving Richard behind, especially under such precarious circumstances. Takuya sighed, sensing her internal conflict.

"You can explain it to your man, but you have to prioritize your safety. He may not understand, but your life is at stake."

Sayuri nodded slowly, the weight of the decision pressing down on her. The idea of flying to Phnom Penh, of starting anew, was both thrilling and terrifying. She felt torn between her current life and the uncertain path ahead. "I need to think about it," she finally said, her voice firm but tinged with uncertainty.

"Of course," Takuya replied, his expression softening. "Just remember, time is not on your side. You need to make a choice soon. In fact, I insist that you text me

tomorrow with your decision. And, if you say yes, I need to know the timeline, so I can book our flights right away, OK?”

“Hai!” she agreed, as her mind spun at the speed of light.

Sayuri walked into the house, the gravity of her meeting with Takuya still heavy on her shoulders. The air felt thick with unspoken tension, and she desperately needed a shower to wash away the remnants of anxiety clinging to her. Yet, she knew it would look suspicious if she went straight to the bathroom after meeting with Takuya. Instead, she decided to talk to Richard first.

“Hi hun-nee,” she greeted him, forcing a smile as she stepped into the living room. Richard was still sitting at his desk, focused on his laptop. He paused, turning to face her, a smile breaking through his concentration.

“Hi baby, how was your meeting?” he asked, his eyes sparkling with curiosity.

Once again, Sayuri felt like a swan gliding serenely on the surface of a pond, while beneath the water her legs were paddling furiously.

“It was OK. Takuya—the Japanese man—offered me a job.”

Richard’s expression shifted, suspicion flickering in his eyes as he scrutinized her closely. She could sense him deliberating, questioning the true nature of her relationship with Takuya once again.

“Oh!” was all Richard could muster, his tone tinged with concern, the smile fading from his face.

“I will tell you everything,” she said, bending down to plant a kiss on his bald spot, a gesture meant to soothe and distract. “But let’s have a shower first,” she suggested, hoping to shift the focus. “It was so hot at Cat Mee. This house is much cooler.”

Richard nodded slowly, still watching her with a hint of uncertainty. “Alright, it’s a good idea. I was also getting a bit hot. We can talk after,” he replied. Sayuri could read his mind. She knew that Richard was talking about ‘after sex’. She smiled as she turned to lead the way to the bathroom. She felt a mix of relief and trepidation, knowing she needed to wash away the meeting’s tension but also wanting to prepare herself for the conversation that lay ahead.

As she stepped into the bathroom, she took a deep breath, steeling herself for what was to come.

“This is the first time you have ever invited me to shower with you,” he stated as Sayuri soaped his back thoroughly. She loved touching his strong upper body. He had the body of a lion and the personality of a domestic cat. Richard was far from perfect, but, if she were to go on YELP, she would still give him 5 stars.

“Yes,” she admitted. After a brief pause, she decided to confess, “You are right. I prefer to shower alone, but I really wanted a shower and I knew you would be suspicious if I showered after coming back from a meeting with ‘Japanese-man’.”

“You know, baby, one of your many good qualities is that you are honest and straightforward. Well, at least I think you are,” Richard said without sarcasm. “And yes, I do get jealous sometimes. I have some insecurities. I think everyone is insecure in one way or another. But, as far as I know, you don’t lie to me. That makes me trust you,” he said with sincerity.

The warmth of his words wrapped around her like a comforting embrace, filling her with a sense of relief and validation. It made her feel good, reaffirming the bond they shared despite the uncertainty looming over her. Once they were finished, Sayuri stepped out of the shower, a playful smile on her lips as she led Richard toward the bedroom. The air was filled with a mixture of warmth and anticipation, and she felt a renewed sense of closeness as they moved together.

Sayuri lay on her back, her cheeks flushed with the warm afterglow of their intimate moment. The soft sheets felt cool against her skin, a delightful contrast to the heat that lingered in her body. She glanced over at Richard, who was lying on his back next to her, breathing heavily, a satisfied smile playing on his lips. The room was filled with a comfortable silence, punctuated only by the rhythm of their heavy breathing. In that peaceful moment, she felt a deep sense of connection and contentment, the worries of the outside world fading away, if only for a little while.

Sayuri turned and snuggled up to Richard, resting her head against his shoulder as she began to stroke his hairless chest. She remembered him telling her that he shaved it to avoid heat rash from living in Thailand, but she suspected there was more to it than that. Beneath his casual demeanour lay a hint of pride in his youthful physique, and she couldn’t help but think that the few grey hairs would shatter the illusion he carefully maintained. As her fingers grazed his smooth skin, she felt a warmth spread through her, a mixture of affection and admiration for the man beside her, who, despite his attempts to mask the passage of time, radiated a charm that was undeniably captivating. He had also mentioned that if reincarnation did exist, he would like to come back as a sexy woman. When she had asked why, he had replied that men were discriminated against when it came to sex.

“Why do you say that,” she had asked, curious to hear his explanation.

“Why is a woman built to enjoy multiple orgasms and a man isn’t? Seems a bit sexist to me,” he had joked. “No, seriously, baby – us men have to work so hard to get laid. It is exhausting. Not only do woman enjoy multiple orgasms, but they also never have to work at getting laid,” Richard tried to explain.

“And, to make matters worse, women can be selective. Men have to settle for anyone,” he lamented.

Knowing that it was just a playful and hypothetical argument, Sayuri said, “OK, then I will make sure I come back as a man and find you,” she said, deliberately trying to boost his ego.

“Thank you,” he said, giving her a peck on the forehead.

They lay in comfortable silence for a few minutes, enjoying the closeness they shared. Richard shifted slightly, propping himself up on one elbow, his gaze focused intently on her. “Can you tell me what Takuya said to you at your meeting at Cat Mee?” he asked, his voice steady but tinged with curiosity.

Taking a deep breath, Sayuri met his eyes, aware of the weight of her words. “He offered me a job working in a scam centre in Cambodia.” She watched as shock flashed across Richard’s face, his expression a mix of disbelief and confusion. He fell silent, simply looking at her, his mind racing to process the information.

“A scam centre? What do you mean?” he finally managed to ask; his tone cautious.

“Takuya has Chinese friends who operate these scam centres in Cambodia. When he told them that I speak both English and Japanese, they asked him to offer me a job,” Sayuri explained, her heart pounding in her chest as she gauged his reaction.

“I see,” Richard replied slowly, his brow furrowing as he absorbed the news. Sayuri could almost visualize the gears turning in his mind, the metaphorical computer chip struggling to process this unexpected turn of events. She knew Richard would be upset upon hearing this, which was why she had lured him to the bedroom beforehand. Pillow talk felt easier; the brain was still swimming in oxytocin and endorphins from their earlier intimacy. But even in this softened atmosphere, she could sense the tension building. She reached out, placing a hand on his arm, hoping to bridge the gap that was forming between them.

“I know it sounds strange, but I need you to understand...” she began, her voice gentle yet firm, ready to navigate the conversation that lay ahead. She watched his face closely for any trace of anger, but she couldn’t see any. Richard’s face was unreadable. *I think he is in shock*, Sayuri thought.

The prolonged silence was beginning to freak her out. She wanted to shout at him and tell him to get angry and throw his toys out of his cot. That would make her feel better. That was what she deserved. But there was only silence.

“How much is the pay?” he finally asked, still expressionless.

“\$2500 a month,” she replied, knowing that Richard was suppressing his feelings and engaging the practical part of his brain.

“That is good money,” he said, obviously surprised. The average salary in Cambodia for unskilled workers was around \$300. Even skilled IT workers seldom made more than \$1500 per month.

“Yes, it is very good money for me,” she agreed.

“Have you already accepted the job,” Richard asked, his eyes filled with hope that she would say no.

“No, I told Takuya that I needed to discuss it with you first,” she replied truthfully.

Richard paused before saying, “Baby, you know my feelings for you. Of course, I want to spend time with you. But we have done this before, so we can do it again, right?” he asked hopefully.

“What do you mean we have done this before?” Sayuri quizzed.

“Well, when I left for the Philippines and then went to South Africa not long after that, we never knew what was going to happen between us, but, in the end, it worked out,” Richard explained.

“That is true,” agreed Sayuri, grasping what Richard was trying to say. They were both travellers. Both digital nomads. If their relationship was strong, then they would find their way back to one another.

“How long do you have to decide whether you take the job or not?” Richard asked softly, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Tomorrow,” Sayuri replied, the weight of her words hanging in the air. She could see the struggle in his eyes, the way he was desperately trying to conceal his breaking heart.

“Where is the job? Phnom Penh?” he pressed, his expression a mixture of concern and resignation.

“Hail!” she affirmed, her heart sinking at the thought of leaving him behind.

“How will you get there?” he asked, trying to grasp at any sliver of hope.

“Fly from Udonthani,” Sayuri answered immediately, her tone steady despite the turmoil inside her.

“Well, I suppose he hasn't booked tickets yet. Maybe there's only one flight a week or something like that. Then we can have more time together,” Richard suggested, his words tinged with a desperate hopefulness. Sayuri could tell he was clutching at straws, trying to prolong their time together as much as possible.

“I don't know how many times a week they fly,” she answered honestly, feeling the tension between them.

“What about accommodation?” Richard persisted; his brow furrowed as he sought more details.

"I already told you. I will be in a compound. Free food and accommodation," Sayuri replied, trying to focus on the practical aspects of the offer.

"A compound. Interesting," Richard said slowly, his scepticism creeping in. "Free food and accommodation plus all that money sounds like a good deal, if it's true," he stated, his voice laced with doubt.

Sayuri sensed the conflict within him—the desire for her to succeed clashing with the fear of losing her. She reached out, placing her hand on his, hoping to bridge the emotional distance that was forming.

"I like you more than I thought I would. To be honest, I did not expect to have such strong feelings for you. But we had this discussion before. I told you that I never stay in relationships more than 6 months. It is not you. It is me. I need to keep moving," she reminded him.

"I know," was all he said, a hint of acceptance in his voice.

Sayuri took a deep breath, trying to steady her emotions. "Remember, Richard, we're both travellers. The first rule of survival is to keep moving," she said, her voice firm yet soothing. "I'm only planning on going to work in Cambodia for two months. I'm sure I'll be back in Nong Pai after that. You have to keep the faith."

Richard nodded, though a flicker of uncertainty still danced in his eyes. Without warning, he shifted his position, lifting her petite frame effortlessly and flipping her 180 degrees so that he could spoon with her. Sayuri let out a little anime shriek, a mix of surprise and delight, before bursting into giggles as he manhandled her into position.

Once settled, she curled up against him like a cat finding a warm lap, revelling in the way his strong arms wrapped around her tightly. The world outside faded away, and in that moment, she felt safe, secure, and loved by the lion-man beside her. *If only he had a mane*, she thought with a playful smile, imagining the wild image of him as a majestic creature.

"See? This feels good, right?" he murmured, tucking her closer as if to shield her from the worries of the world.

"Very good," she replied, her heart swelling with affection. In his embrace, she felt the strength and warmth that always reassured her, allowing her to push aside the uncertainties of the future for now.

Sayuri and Richard sat on the verandah, the tension between them palpable. It was the day after she had revealed the job offer in Cambodia, and Richard had been putting on a brave face. Sayuri had texted Takuya after breakfast to confirm her acceptance. He had replied promptly, assuring her he would book flights to Phnom Penh and get back to her in the evening with all the details and timeline.

Now, as they sat on the verandah, the warm breeze rustling the leaves around them, Sayuri felt a bittersweet mix of excitement and sadness. The two of them enjoyed each other's company in comfortable silence, cherishing the moments they had left together. Richard occasionally squeezed her hand, a silent acknowledgment of the limited time before her departure, and she leaned into him, savouring the warmth of his presence.

She was thinking about how he had told her that he loved her during their long conversation the night before and how he had also told her that he accepted that this was her decision; he didn't own her. They both remembered their early conversations about long-term relationships, how Sayuri had made it clear she wasn't looking for anything permanent, nor was she a fan of long-distance connections. Yet, last night, they had both committed to trying to make it work.

"Richard," Sayuri began, her voice steady but gentle, "as much as I like you..." she hesitated, deliberately avoiding the word 'love,' "I sometimes get lonely. I need a man in a physical way."

The honesty of her admission hung heavily in the air, a warning that she hoped he would understand. She watched as hurt flickered in his eyes, and she quickly added, "I don't mean to hurt you. I just want to be open about how I feel. You know my fears about betrayal. To me, betrayal involves lying. I don't want to lie to you."

Richard leaned back in his chair, processing her words. He had been thinking about this all day, piecing together what she was really saying. "So, you're telling me, in your own way, that you don't expect me to remain faithful either, right?" he said slowly, searching her expression for confirmation. "That you'll try to be faithful for as long as you can, but if loneliness creeps in, you won't hold back?"

Sayuri met his gaze, a mixture of relief and sadness washing over her. "Yes, that's correct," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. "I'm not making promises to be faithful. I just want you to know where I stand."

"And you're giving me permission to do the same?" he asked, his tone serious, yet understanding.

"Yes," she affirmed, a small sigh escaping her lips. "I want us both to be honest with each other about what we're feeling. It's better than pretending everything will be fine."

Richard nodded slowly, the weight of their conversation settling between them. "I appreciate your honesty, Sayuri. I just wish it didn't have to be this way."

"Me too," she admitted, her heart aching at the thought of what lay ahead. "I'm sure you agree that life is complicated. Sometimes, hard choices have to be made." Richard remained silent.

"What are you thinking," Sayuri asked softly, a concerned look on her face.

Richard swivelled his head towards her and smiled. "Thank you," he said.

“For what?” enquired Sayuri, puzzled.

“I have no reason to be sad,” he said, philosophically, “you are the best thing that ever happened to me. So, thank you.”

Sayuri felt her cheeks flush as Richard lavished her with compliments, the warmth creeping up her neck and making her uneasy. She had never been good at receiving praise; it left her feeling exposed and vulnerable. It was similar to her discomfort with the topic of death. What does one say when someone they know dies? She often grappled with that question.

“My thoughts and prayers are with you” felt disingenuous since she wasn’t religious, and she had too much to do to sit around all day thinking about dead people. Death was a depressing subject; one she preferred to avoid at all costs. She had never been to a funeral in her life. The thought of attending her mother’s funeral sometimes haunted her, and she often wondered if she would be brave enough to face it when the time came. Just thinking about death made her feel uncomfortable, a tight knot forming in her stomach. She didn’t think of herself as a coward, but if she were honest, the reason she shied away from the topic was that it reminded her of her own mortality.

As Richard continued to speak, she forced herself to focus on his words, trying to push aside the unsettling thoughts. She could see the sincerity in his eyes, and despite her discomfort, a small part of her felt grateful for his affection. But the unease remained, a shadow lurking in the background, reminding her of the fragility of life. She took a deep breath, trying to steady her racing heart, wishing she could embrace the warmth of his compliments without the weight of her fears. They both knew the road ahead would be fraught with challenges, but in that moment of shared honesty, they found a flicker of understanding, a fragile bond that they hoped would endure the trials to come.

“Any messages from Takuya yet?” Richard finally broke the awkward silence.

“No, nothing,” Sayuri replied, checking her phone.

“Well, I hope your flight is not tonight,” Richard said, “I need more time with you. I think I am addicted to you.”

“Oh! So, you’re not in love with me – you’re just a useless addict?” Sayuri joked, trying to lift the mood.

“Exactly!” Richard chuckled, grateful for the comic relief.

Sayuri's phone pinged suddenly, startling both of them. She glanced at the screen and saw a message from Takuya:

Konichiwa. I have booked our flights. We leave on Tuesday morning, 7am. I will organize the airport transfer. All you have to do is meet me at Cat Mee at 7am. OK?

Sayuri replied immediately, her heart sinking at the thought of the impending journey: *Hai! See you then.*

A moment later, another ping from Takuya appeared: *And don't leave the house!*

Sayuri felt a chill run down her spine. She had not lied to Richard, but she had certainly omitted the fact that she was in danger from the Nong Pai Yakuza. The thought of revealing that truth made her stomach twist. She could only imagine how he would react if he found out. The military training that Richard often spoke about might kick in, and she would see the dark side of him that she knew simmered just beneath the surface. She turned to Richard, forcing a smile to mask her unease.

“Good news,” she said, as buoyantly possible.

“I love good news,” Richard remarked, the look on his face not matching his sentiment.

“We are only flying on Tuesday. Today is Sunday. Yay!” she put her hands in the air, in a pitiful attempt to cheer Richard up.

“I’ll take it,” he said. “It almost feels like a win,” he smiled weakly. Richard turned to Sayuri; his expression serious. “Can we talk about Cambodia for a moment?”

Sayuri felt a flash of annoyance at the question. She had already made up her mind to go work in the scam centre, and nothing he could say would change that.

“What do you mean?” she replied curtly, the stress of the impending departure getting to her.

“When you told me about your job in Cambodia, I did a bit of research. It seems that a lot of people were told they would get paid \$2,500, but when they get there, it’s only \$800,” he explained, concern lacing his voice.

“I don’t think that will happen to me,” she said emphatically, irritation creeping into her tone.

“Why do you say that?” Richard asked, genuinely curious.

“Because Takuya knows them well, and they need my skills,” she said simply, crossing her arms defensively.

“Okay. But there’s one other thing too,” Richard continued, his voice steady.

“Whaaat?” Sayuri replied, not enjoying his line of questioning. She clearly didn’t want to talk about her new job.

“Can I just show you something on my phone quickly? I’m worried about you,” Richard persisted. Before she could respond, he started reading an article aloud to her, his eyes focused on the screen.

“This was last week. Listen.”

“Twenty-five Japanese nationals suspected of involvement in a cyberscam operation based in Cambodia were deported to Japan on Wednesday,” said Gen. Khieu Sopheak, a spokesperson for Cambodia’s Interior Ministry.”

“Doesn’t that worry you?” Richard asked, his voice laced with concern.

“No,” Sayuri replied firmly, shaking her head as if to dispel his worries.

“Okay. I’m not trying to stop you from going, baby, but I just want you to know the risks before you go,” he said gently, his eyes searching hers for understanding.

Sayuri felt a mix of frustration and empathy for Richard. She appreciated his concern but wished he could see that she had already weighed the risks. “I understand, but I need to do this,” she said, her tone softening slightly.

“I’ll be careful, I promise.” She hoped her reassurance would ease his worries, even if she knew deep down that the reality of the situation was far more complicated.

“Okay, I will stop now. I felt that I had to tell you. I could never live with myself if something happened to you in Cambodia and I had never told you,” Richard said, his expression earnest.

Sayuri smirked, leaning back in her chair. “So, you told me just to make yourself feel better?” she teased, her eyes sparkling with mischief, fully aware of his intentions but choosing to give him a hard time about it.

“No, I—” he started, but she cut him off.

“Relax, hun-nee, I’m just teasing you,” she replied, noting the relief wash over his face. Richard wasn’t one for drama. She thought back to the one morning when she had woken up with period pains and had given him a tongue lashing about washing her laundry.

“Why did you wash my laundry?” she had shouted at him, the first time she had ever shown such anger towards him.

Richard had been shocked, his brows knitting together in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I never asked you to wash my laundry,” she had continued, the irritation bubbling up.

“Baby, all the laundry is in one basket. All I did was empty the basket into the washing machine. I don’t understand why that’s wrong?” he had replied, looking genuinely perplexed.

She had kept on giving him a hard time about it, and eventually, in a fit of frustration, she had stormed out of the room. When she returned ten minutes later, having had time to cool down, she found Richard sitting quietly, his expression distraught. He looked speechless, afraid to say anything for fear of setting her off again.

In the end, she had apologized, confessing that she got very irritable during her period. Then she had revealed a surprising truth - Richard was the first man ever to wash her underwear. "I like to wash it my own way," she had admitted, a sheepish smile breaking through her irritation.

After that, Richard had always made it a point to separate the laundry, letting her wash her own clothes. The memory made her feel warm inside, a reminder of their growing bond and the little quirks that made their relationship unique. Now, as she sat with him, she felt a renewed sense of connection, grateful for his patience and understanding, even when she tested his limits. Richard forced a smile, sensing the shift in the conversation.

"Can I give you some money?" he asked, his tone casual yet sincere.

"Why?" Sayuri quizzed, her brow raised in curiosity.

"Because you have no web design work, and you'll probably only get paid at the end of next month," Richard explained, a hint of concern in his voice.

"No, I'm okay. I have some savings. They'll be enough," she replied, smiling at him, grateful for the offer but determined to remain fiercely independent.

In her opinion, money was usually the biggest threat to a relationship. She never again wanted to rely on another man for financial support, a lesson she had learned the hard way with Ken Watanabe. For three years, she had happily depended on Ken to support her, but at what cost? When he had finally kicked her out of their 'love nest' because of her drug use, she had still been a teenager. Without even a high school certificate, she had had no choice but to accept his job offer of working in one of his massage parlours.

"Are you sure, baby?" Richard asked, his brow furrowing slightly as he searched her face for any sign of doubt.

"Yes, I have enough," she reassured him, her smile warm but firm. "But thank you for the offer."

"Great," Richard said, visibly relieved, although she could still see the flicker of concern in his eyes. He respected her independence, but she could tell that part of him still wanted to help. As they sat there, the air filled with unspoken emotions, Sayuri felt a surge of appreciation for Richard. He cared for her deeply, and while she admired that, she also knew she had to stand on her own two feet. *Gaman*.

"Do you want to go out for supper?" Richard asked, glancing over at Sayuri with hopeful eyes.

"No. I don't feel like it," Sayuri replied, her voice flat. Actually, she did feel like it, but how could she tell Richard that Takuya had forbidden her to leave the house?

"Okay. I can cook if you want me to? You cooked last night," Richard offered, trying to keep the mood light.

“What will you cook?” Sayuri queried, her interest piqued despite her earlier reluctance.

“I was thinking about beef curry,” he said, his enthusiasm evident.

“I like curry, but the beef in Thailand is not good,” Sayuri hinted, subtly suggesting that another meat might be more suitable for the dish.

Richard nodded, catching her drift. “I’ll go to MAKRO. They have Australian beef there. Is that okay?” he proposed.

“Yes. That sounds good,” she conceded, feeling a flicker of excitement at the thought of a hearty meal.

“Okay. Let me go now then. MAKRO is a long ride from here,” Richard decided, standing up from his chair.

“Okay. Get some lettuce too, please,” Sayuri asked politely, appreciating his willingness to cook.

“I will,” Richard agreed, as he went to find a shirt. He had told her that one of the best things about living in Thailand was that he never had to wear a shirt indoors. He hated cold countries.

Richard spent the afternoon in the kitchen, diligently making curry and rice while Sayuri lazed around, stretching on the couch and listening to her favourite *Healthy Living* podcast.

She felt surprisingly relaxed and happy, a state of mind that felt rare and almost foreign. She suspected it was because, for the next two months, she wouldn’t be working insane hours designing websites for a pittance. It was as if a huge weight had been lifted off her shoulders—one she hadn’t even realized was there. Determined to earn decent money in Cambodia, she was resolved to face whatever risks lay ahead, real or imagined.

Every now and then, she would sneak into the kitchen to give Richard a quick hug and a kiss, playfully slapping him on the bum as she scurried off, dodging the possibility of him pulling her into an impromptu dance on the kitchen floor.

“Supper is finished,” Richard announced, strolling into the bedroom with a proud grin.

“OK. Thank you, honey. I will make *salada*,” Sayuri replied, her voice bright.

“Sa-lad,” Richard corrected playfully, “not salad-a.”

This was another ongoing joke between them. *Sarada* was Japanese for salad, so she always pronounced the English translation as ‘salada.’ Richard understood what she meant but enjoyed teasing her about it. He didn’t correct her as often as he used to,

likely realizing that too much correction could be annoying rather than helpful. And after witnessing her period tantrums, he preferred to tread carefully around her moods. Sayuri giggled, rolling her eyes as she grabbed the ingredients for her salad.

“Fine, fine! I’ll make your ‘sal-lad,’” she said, her playful tone matching his. “But you have to get out of the kitchen,” she commanded, “You are too big. You get in the way,” she said, playfully shooing him out with her hands. Richard ignored her playful protests and approached her too quickly for her to react, trapping her against the kitchen sink. He planted a quick kiss full on her lips and declared, “Okay, I surrender. I am going,” before scampering out of the kitchen, evading her playful swat with the wooden spoon she had grabbed in mock anger.

Twenty minutes later, Sayuri entered the lounge, feeling victorious. “Sal-lad is finished!” she announced, a triumphant smile on her face.

“I’m going to 7-Eleven,” she added, her excitement bubbling over. So far, she had heeded Takuya’s warning not to leave the house, but 7 Eleven was close by and she always came straight back home. She was sure that she would be fine.

“Okay, baby,” Richard replied without looking up, absorbed in reading an article on his laptop.

When she returned shortly thereafter with two six-packs of beer and the obligatory plastic packet full of chocolates, Richard’s face lit up. He didn’t say a word, but she could tell he was thrilled; the night was shaping up to be a repeat of the night before. All he said was, “Do we still have weed, baby?”

“Hai!” she responded enthusiastically, matching his excitement.

“Great!” Richard enthused, a grin spreading across his face.

Sayuri pottered around in the kitchen for a bit, getting the plates and cutlery ready for supper and dismantling the 6-packs and putting the beers in the fridge, then came up behind Richard and wrapped her arms around his neck, resting her chin on his shoulder. “Do you want a massage?” she asked, her voice low and inviting.

The look on Richard’s face was priceless. He blinked in surprise, his eyes widening. Although she had given him a couple of massages before, she had never offered him one outright; he always had to beg. “Are you serious?” he asked, his tone a mix of disbelief and excitement.

“Of course! I can’t have you getting all tense while we’re relaxing tonight,” she replied with a playful grin, feeling a rush of satisfaction at his reaction.

“Yes, please,” Richard smiled, a glimmer of anticipation in his eyes, quickly standing up and following her into her lair.

“Take your shorts off,” Sayuri commanded as soon as they entered the bedroom. Despite having told Richard that she might not be able to remain faithful while in Cambodia, she was determined to try. She figured that if she sated her appetite now, it might help her hold out a bit longer. Richard had a playful grin on his face as he assumed the position, lying face down on the yoga mat. He waited eagerly for her to begin the usual head, shoulder, and back massage, which she delivered with practiced ease.

“On your back,” she ordered after a few minutes.

“Yes, madam,” he complied, giving her a mock salute before flipping over.

Sayuri stood up and quickly slipped off her tiny black shorts and white tank top, feeling a rush of confidence as she prepared to massage his front. She started with his legs, her small yet strong hands expertly finding the hard-to-reach spots between his muscles. As an ex-massage therapist, she knew exactly how to apply the right pressure, and Richard looked like he was in heaven.

“Close your eyes,” she commanded softly, her voice a soothing balm in the dim light of the room.

Richard obeyed, a relaxed smile spreading across his face as he surrendered to her touch. Sayuri felt a sense of satisfaction wash over her; this was a moment of connection, of intimacy, and she relished every second of it. As she worked her way up his legs and across his torso, she smiled to herself as she watched his totem pole reach for the sky. *I have the power!* she thought as she straddled him.

CHAPTER 47

Sayuri wheeled her carry-on case into the lounge, the soft hum of nature sounds wafting through the air. Richard was sitting on the sofa, engrossed in an episode of *Blue Planet* on Netflix. She knew he liked to put on wildlife videos when he was deep in thought; he had mentioned that animal programs relaxed him and made it easier for him to process his feelings. As she watched him, she couldn't help but think he was likely stressed about her departure early the next morning.

The previous day, Richard had insisted they dress up in smart clothes for a selfie. Sayuri had agreed, amused by his enthusiasm. He had immediately transferred the pictures onto a stick drive and rushed off to the camera shop to get copies made. When he returned, he proudly presented her with a 6x9 framed print of what he deemed the best shot—Sayuri kissing Richard on the cheek. He looked smart in what he called his 'teacher work clothes,' - crisp button-up shirt and neatly pressed slacks. The second framed copy of the photo he placed on the TV stand.

"I have you for another 12 hours," he remarked lightly as she placed her suitcase by the door and settled onto the sofa beside him. Suddenly, he turned to face her, his expression serious.

"I love you."

"I know," was all Sayuri said, her voice steady but her heart beating a bit too fast. Richard didn't comment further, and the import of their shared silence hung in the air. They both understood that professing love at this moment would only complicate things.

Sayuri knew that one of the reasons she had spoiled Richard throughout the weekend was to ensure that, if they never saw each other again, he would remember her fondly. The thought of their paths possibly never crossing again lingered in her mind like a shadow, and while she didn't want to fully accept that reality, she recognized this special weekend as her way of saying goodbye—just in case.

There was nothing left to say. Her actions had said it all, encapsulating her feelings in the quiet intimacy they had shared. It was the Japanese way, a subtle expression of love that didn't always require words. As the soothing sounds of the ocean played in the background, Sayuri leaned her head against Richard's shoulder, savouring the moment, knowing that whatever the future held, their weekend of excess would forever remain a cherished memory.

It was only 7 PM, a bit earlier than their usual supper time, but she knew she needed to recharge her batteries before the long haul to Phnom Penh the next morning. Mornings were never her strong suit, and the thought of waking up early made her groan inwardly. Getting to Udonthani was always the worst part; after that, the flight was less than two hours, but travelling always felt like an eternity when she was bleary-eyed.

"Hun-nee, are you ready to eat?" she asked softly.

“Yes, baby. I am ready,” he replied, his smile brightening the room as he started to clear the coffee table to make space for their feast.

Richard had decided on a spontaneous dinner, opting for a selection of sashimi and sushi, along with a colourful container of salad and all the necessary condiments. The sight of it made Sayuri’s stomach rumble—she could already taste the fresh flavours. And of course, he’d insisted on leftovers from the night market, those spicy sausages that she had grown to love.

“Just wait until you taste the dessert,” he said with a mischievous grin. “Orgasmic!”

The promise of his coffee Swiss roll soaked in whisky made her laugh. “You always say that. I’m ready to be impressed.”

Soon, they were settled on the couch, a cozy spread of food laid out before them. Richard had found a cheesy American rom-com to play in the background. Sayuri never really paid attention to the movies, but she enjoyed the comforting hum of laughter and romance as they ate and talked.

“This is amazing!” she exclaimed, savouring a piece of sashimi. “Did you buy it at that place in Asawan Centre?” she asked, recognising the containers as coming from her favourite sushi place.

“Hai!” Richard laughed.

They continued to eat, the conversation flowing easily between them, punctuated by the soppy romantic antics of the characters on screen. The delicious food and the spontaneous laughter easing the tension she had carried all day. As the film played on, she found herself relaxing more and more, grateful for this little oasis of comfort before facing the challenges ahead.

“So, the last supper—once again,” Richard said pensively, a slight chuckle escaping him that felt more like a sigh. “Our third.”

“That is a good sign,” Sayuri chirped in, trying to lift his mood. She flashed a bright smile, hoping to dispel the weight of his words.

“I suppose you are right,” he agreed, though his tone was still tinged with uncertainty.

With supper finished, Richard started clearing the dishes, taking them to the kitchen. Sayuri followed him, stepping into the bright lights of the room as he began washing up. The sound of running water mingled with the clinking of plates, creating a soothing rhythm. She busied herself wrapping the leftovers in shrink wrap, carefully sealing each container before placing them in the fridge.

As she worked, Sayuri couldn’t help but reflect on how well they cohabitated. They respected each other’s space, instinctively knowing when to give a little room and when

to come together as a team. It was a delicate balance, one that felt comforting and familiar.

I wonder if I will ever have this in my life again, she pondered. The thought lingered, heavy yet hopeful, as she sealed the last container.

Richard turned off the water and dried his hands on a dish towel, his gaze steady on her.

“I guess it is shower time for you, baby,” he said simply, knowing her bedtime routine.

“Hai!” she said, giving him a big hug and getting on her toes to kiss him on the mouth. “What are you going to do now?” she asked. “Watch TV?”

“No, I will lie in bed and read my book. I haven’t read in days. It’s all your fault,” he teased, giving her a wicked smile.

“Leally?” she said, playing along; purposely choosing the word for maximum *kawaii* effect.

“Hai!” said Richard, facetiously.

Richard and Sayuri finished tidying up the kitchen, the last of the dishes drying on the rack. Sayuri yawned, the fatigue of the last two fun-filled nights settling into her bones.

“OK, I’m going to shower,” she announced, heading toward the bathroom.

“Sounds good,” Richard replied, heading to their bedroom. He picked up his book, settling into bed with the hopes of reading for a while. After two nights of late-night activities, he wasn’t expecting a repeat tonight. They were both tired, and Sayuri had an early morning ahead of her.

Sayuri relished the cool water cascading over her as she poured another scoop of water over her head. After her shower, she spent a few moments packing her big backpack, ensuring she had everything she needed for her trip to Phnom Penh. Her carry-on was already packed and waiting by the door, a reminder, not only of the adventure that lay ahead, but of the perilous future of her relationship with Richard.

Once she was ready, Sayuri slipped into the bedroom. Richard was still propped up in bed, the light from his lamp casting a soft glow over the pages of his book. He seemed to be struggling to keep his eyes open, the weariness evident on his face. Sayuri climbed into bed, wiggling her head between Richard’s head and the book he was holding. She leaned in to kiss him goodnight.

“Goodnight, hun-nee. I’m going to listen to my podcast and then sleep. You look tired. You should sleep too,” she said softly.

Richard kissed the top of her head, then lifted her chin to plant a warm, lingering kiss on her lips. “Yes, I am very tired. You drained my batteries,” he said with a smile, his eyes sparkling with affection.

“Is that all I drained?” she asked facetiously.

“I think you already know the answer to that,” he smiled leaning over to give her a last goodnight kiss. “Goodnight, baby. Sleep well.”

“Before you sleep, please put the alarm on for 5:30 AM. You know how slow I am in the morning,” Sayuri smiled, her eyes teasing but sincere.

“OK. I’ll do it right away, baby,” Richard agreed, reaching for his phone. He set the alarm with a few taps and then turned back to her, his expression softening. “Goodnight,” he said again, his voice low and comforting.

With one final glance at her, he switched off his lamp, the room plunging into a cozy darkness. Sayuri nestled into her pillow, the sound of her podcast filling the quiet space as Richard closed his eyes, surrendering to sleep, grateful for the moments they had shared.

Sayuri sat in the back of the minivan next to Takuya, the hum of the engine a constant backdrop as they made their way to Udonthani airport, conflicting emotions sparring within her. On the one hand, she was thrilled to be starting a new adventure - especially a well-paid adventure. On the other hand, a sense of melancholy washed over her, reminding her of the postpartum depression she had experienced after Naomi’s birth.

“How are you feeling, Sayuri-chan?” Takuya asked, glancing over at her with genuine concern.

“I’m excited about earning decent money for a change, but I’m really going to miss Richard,” she replied honestly, her voice tinged with a mix of enthusiasm and sorrow.

“Sounds serious,” Takuya commented, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, it is more serious than I anticipated. He has grown on me,” Sayuri admitted, a small smile creeping onto her lips despite the heaviness in her heart.

“So do warts,” Takuya shot back, attempting humour but missing the mark.

“What do you mean?” Sayuri asked, her brow furrowing in confusion.

“Warts also grow on people,” Takuya explained, his tone light but a hint of awkwardness colouring his words.

“What are you trying to say?” Sayuri queried, a bit annoyed now. She was not in the mood for jokes that fell flat.

Takuya, sensing her irritation, quickly backtracked. “Nothing. It was just a bad joke. Sumimasen,” he said, offering a sheepish smile.

Sayuri sighed, pulling out her phone to check her messages. Nothing. She realized she was checking her phone more often than usual, a habit she was developing in her separation anxiety. Only just having departed Nong Pai, she already felt a pang of longing for Richard's presence.

As the landscape blurred by outside the window, she couldn't shake the feeling of his absence. Each passing moment felt heavier, and she tucked her phone away, closing her eyes for a moment. She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself as the reality of her new adventure loomed ahead, mixed with the bittersweet ache of leaving someone she had come to care for so deeply.

Sayuri gazed out of the minivan window, her eyes drifting over the lush green rice fields that stretched endlessly on either side of the road. The golden stalks swayed gently in the breeze, creating a shimmering sea under the bright sun. Small Thai villages dotted the landscape, with their wooden houses perched on stilts, laundry flapping from lines strung between trees. Occasionally, she caught sight of a cluster of children playing near a water buffalo, their laughter ringing like sweet chimes in the warm air.

Despite the picturesque scenery, a knot of apprehension twisted in her stomach, reminding her of the uncertainty she faced in her new job. She focused on the vibrant colours of the landscape, trying to push aside thoughts of Richard and the daunting reality of working in a scam centre, hoping the beauty around her would soothe her restless mind.

That morning, Sayuri had jumped out of bed at 5:30 a.m. when the alarm blared its unwelcome call. By 6:30 am, she was ready, leaving her with a precious 30 minutes to spend with Richard before heading next door to Cat Mee guesthouse to meet Takuya.

Richard had brewed fresh coffee for both of them, and they sat together on the verandah, the morning air filled with the cheerful chirping of birds. She noticed the dark bags under his eyes, a telltale sign of a restless night. As the time to leave approached, Sayuri felt a wave of awkwardness wash over her when she asked him not to accompany her to Cat Mee. Richard nodded in understanding, and her final words were a gentle suggestion for him to go back to bed. Judging by the silence that followed—despite it being less than an hour since she left—she assumed he had taken her advice and drifted back to sleep.

Sayuri was lost in her thoughts, her mind swirling with confusion and uncertainty. Takuya had fallen silent beside her, likely acutely aware of her perplexed state, which made the atmosphere between them thick with unspoken words. She gazed out at the passing scenery, but it all blurred together—colours and shapes merging into a haze as her thoughts churned with a million different worries.

Suddenly, Takuya's voice cut through her reverie. "Sayuri!" he shouted, jolting her back to reality. She blinked, realizing they had arrived at the airport, and assumed he had to shout because she had been too zoned out to hear him the first time. After loading their luggage onto a trolley, they made their way to the check-in counter. The check-in lady looked up at Takuya with an apologetic expression.

“I’m sorry, but your flight was an hour ago and has already departed.” Takuya’s face fell, frustration flashing in his eyes as he began to argue, waving his ticket at her.

She calmly explained that an email and text message had been sent to all passengers about the flight time change. Takuya quickly checked his phone and, to his embarrassment, found a text from the airline confirming the alteration. Feeling silly, he turned to the lady, his cheeks flushed. “I’m really sorry for the trouble,” he said, his voice softer now, as he realized the oversight.

Sayuri and Takuya stood at the airport check-in counter, the reality of missing their flight to Phnom Penh sinking in. Takuya quickly booked two tickets for the next available flight, but the waiting time was excruciating—five long hours. “Well, at least we managed to get on the next flight,” he said, trying to remain optimistic as they made their way to a coffee shop inside the terminal.

The café was bustling, filled with the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee. It boasted padded chairs, a couple of inviting sofas, a phone-charging station, and free Wi-Fi—perfect for Sayuri. They settled into a comfortable corner, the soft cushions inviting them to relax as they waited for their flight to be called. As Sayuri took a sip of her coffee, her phone pinged. She glanced down and saw a message from Richard.

Hi baby. It is a busy day for you. An exciting new adventure. I don't want to message you too much on a traveling day, so I will not message again until you contact me. Miss you.

Sayuri’s face lit up, a smile spreading across her lips.

Don't worry, hun-nee, you can text me. I am still in Udonthani. We missed our flight.

Leally? Richard replied, his playful tone evident as he added a smiley face.

Leally, Sayuri played along, chuckling at his humour.

OK. When is your new flight?

Four more hours, she typed back, feeling annoyed by the delay but comforted by their connection.

OK baby. Have a good flight. Message me when you get to your new home.

OK, honey. I miss you. See you, she replied, her heart warmed by their exchange.

Putting her phone down, Sayuri looked at Takuya, who was scrolling through his own messages, a frown lingering on his face.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“Just letting my Chinese partners know about our delayed flight. The compound is outside the city and they need to send a car for us,” he explained.

"I see," Sayuri said, disappointed that the compound was not in the city.

Sayuri had been to Phnom Penh before. She had enjoyed exploring Phnom Penh, the vibrant capital of Cambodia, with its rich tapestry of attractions - a blend of history, culture, and modern life. She had especially enjoyed her visit to the majestic Royal Palace, with its stunning architecture and serene gardens, where the Silver Pagoda housed priceless artifacts.

The poignant Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and the Killing Fields had chilled her to the bone, a stark reminder of Cambodia's turbulent history. Her favourite spot had been the bustling Central Market, housed in a striking Art Deco building, where she had shopped for local crafts and sampled delicious street food. In the evenings she had walked along the riverside promenade, enjoying the picturesque views of the Mekong River. Of course, her favourite part of the city had been the café district.

Sayuri spent the next three hours immersed in health and fitness podcasts, the familiar voices providing a comforting distraction as she tried to shake off her lingering anxiety about the trip. Hunger had eventually forced her to eat something and she had shared some toasted sandwiches with Takuya, her last meal before boarding their flight to Phnom Penh.

The flight was short and uneventful. When they arrived, a Cambodian driver greeted them with a warm smile and decent English. He loaded their luggage into the van and set off toward the compound. As they drove through the darkening streets, Sayuri felt as if butterflies were fluttering in her stomach. However, her anticipation quickly turned to unease as they approached their destination.

The compound loomed ahead, stark against the night sky. A massive fence encircled the area, making it look more like a prison than a welcoming place. Sayuri's heart sank as she took in the scene - a solitary gate with a guardhouse and a boom. It felt bleak and confining, a stark contrast to the lush greenery surrounding Jolene's house in Nong Pai, where she had felt so at ease.

Takuya, sensing her unease, placed a hand on her shoulder and led her inside. They were greeted by three Chinese partners who managed the operation. Although they were pleasant, the language barrier quickly became apparent; none of them spoke English or Japanese. Takuya's limited grasp of Chinese was enough to facilitate basic communication, but the back-and-forth translating felt tiresome to Sayuri. All she wanted was to be shown to her sleeping quarters, to find solace in a quiet space after the long journey. However, the partners insisted on a "welcoming meal" first. Sayuri forced a smile as they led her to the food court, but the sight of the elaborate spread awaiting them made her heart flutter.

The table was adorned with an array of Chinese and Japanese delicacies that momentarily distracted her from her doubts. She spotted neatly arranged sushi rolls, glistening with fresh slices of fish and vibrant vegetables, alongside delicate sashimi artfully presented on ice. There were also steaming bowls of miso soup, fragrant with seaweed and tofu, and a colourful assortment of pickled vegetables that reminded her

of home. A tray of beautifully crafted gyoza, crisp on one side and tender on the other, beckoned invitingly, while a pot of warm, fluffy rice sat nearby.

The familiar scents and vibrant colours brought a wave of nostalgia, reminding her of family meals and comforting moments, easing her anxiety and making her feel a little better about her new surroundings. *At least I don't have to cook*, she rationalised, as she filled a side plate with an assortment of delicacies. *Maybe compound life is not as bad as I expected.*

Next to the table, a cooler overflowed with free beers, but fatigue tugged at her limbs after the long journey. She knew that if she had more than one beer she would not stop until the beers were finished.

"Can you show me to my sleeping quarters?" she asked Takuya as she placed her empty beer bottle on the table, a hint of weariness in her voice.

"Of course," Takuya replied, leading her away from the festivities. He opened the door to a spacious room with a double bed in the centre, but little else—just a small fridge humming quietly in the corner and a small verandah where a washing machine stood idle.

"You'll start training in a few days," Takuya explained. "Until then, you can rest and explore. The food court is just a short walk away." Sayuri felt a wave of relief wash over her; the thought of a couple of days to recharge was exactly what she needed. Tomorrow would be simple—she could relax and head to the food court whenever hunger struck. Once Takuya left her to settle in, Sayuri pulled out her phone and messaged Richard.

Hi hun-nee. I have arrived at the compound. It is OK. The food is good. How are you?

Richard's reply came swiftly.

*Hi baby. Glad you arrived safely. While I was waiting for your text, I wrote you an email.
Read it first and then text me after. It will be easier.*

OK. I will read it now, Sayuri typed back, her heart fluttering with curiosity.

She was a secretive person, careful about what she shared with the world. No social media cluttered her life—only LINE for texting. She had multiple email addresses for different people and seldom acknowledged any incoming mail. In fact, she rarely checked the inbox for the address she reserved for Richard; he always had to remind her about new messages.

Opening the email, Sayuri found a long love letter, each line dripping with emotion. It was clear to her that he was heartbroken, and a pang of guilt twisted in her stomach. She wanted to comfort him, to reassure him despite the distance. After reading, she quickly texted him.

Thank you for the email. I will be back in Nong Pai in 2 months, honey. I promise. She hoped it would be safe to return by then—only time would tell.

Yay!

A small smile crept onto Sayuri's face, warming her heart amid the uncertainty that lay ahead.

Do you have a TV?

No, only one bed and a fridge inside the room. Washing machine is on the balcony. I tried to use it but the water leaks.

Oh no. Sorry. If you have time to watch Netflix, just remember that I added you to my account. I'll send the login details again.

The login details appeared on her phone. She took a screenshot. *Thanks, honey. Tomorrow I will watch.*

OK. If you need anything, just message me.

Thanks.

You must be tired, so I will love you and leave you.

Yes, I am tired. I will sleep soon. Goodnight honey.

Goodnight baby.

It's official. We're in a long-distance relationship, Sayuri thought to herself. I can do this. Gaman.

CHAPTER 48

Tokyo

Spring, 2002

Sayuri had been working in one of the Yamaguchi-gumi's massage parlours for eight years, ever since Ken Watanabe ended their relationship due to her growing dependence on marijuana. However, that was only part of the problem; during their three years together, her drinking had also intensified; primarily out of boredom.

Life with Ken had been comfortable—he transformed one of his apartments into their secret retreat, allowing her to live rent-free. Since he was married, she had plenty of time to herself, but without a job, her days became a monotonous cycle of drinking and seeking drugs from the Yakuza establishments he managed. Starting their relationship at just 15, Sayuri had been treated like a VIP, enjoying privileges that blurred the lines of reality.

The lavish lifestyle had both captivated and ensnared her, making it difficult to break free from the patterns that had formed during those formative years. When Ken finally cut ties with her, it was a harsh wake-up call. With no high school diploma and no job experience, she felt she had little choice but to accept his offer of work at the massage parlour.

Ironically, the timing was fortuitous. Her father had recently stopped paying alimony to her mother, having succumbed to alcoholism and losing his job. The last she heard from a client at the parlour - who had once worked at the same bank as her father - was that he had squandered his last funds on gambling, desperately hoping for a miracle to save him from his downward spiral.

Unfortunately, like many before him, he had failed, and his descent into addiction had begun in earnest. According to the same client, her father had attempted to join one of the Japanese government's vocational training programs aimed at helping the unemployed acquire new skills in high-demand fields. However, his stint as a factory worker was short-lived due to his persistent drinking problem.

Sayuri was focused, her hands expertly working on the tense muscles of her client in the dimly lit massage booth. The familiar scent of essential oils filled the air, wrapping around her like a soothing embrace. In the eight years she had been doing this, she had developed a rhythm that allowed her to detach from the reality of her life, finding solace in the routine.

But today, that calm was shattered.

The door burst open, and two men stormed in, the atmosphere shifting instantly from tranquillity to turmoil. Having secured the room, one of the men shouted “OK, boss,” and Sayuri listened to the click-click-click of a walking stick get louder as she stood frozen to the spot, still in shock.

An older man limped through the doorway, the gold-plated handle of his ornate walking stick beaming muted rays of light like a miniature disco ball. Despite his pronounced limp, his presence was commanding as he stood at the entrance leaning heavily on his stick, flanked by two heavy-set younger men who looked menacing as they glared at her, arms folded.

“Get out! Get out!” the leader bellowed at the man receiving a naked massage. Panic flickered in the man’s eyes as he scrambled to gather his clothes from the chair in the corner, hands shaking uncontrollably. He fumbled awkwardly, stumbling over his own feet as he rushed out, face flushed with embarrassment and fear. Sayuri stood frozen, her mind racing to comprehend the chaos. The air felt thick with tension, and her heart pounded in her chest.

“You don’t know who I am, do you?” the leader sneered, his gaze locking onto her with an intensity that sent shivers down her spine.

“No,” she replied meekly, her voice barely above a whisper.

The man beckoned to his two companions, and they exited the room, leaving her alone with him. The door clicked shut, sealing them in a bubble of uncertainty. Sayuri’s thoughts raced through her options, desperately trying to remain calm despite the rising panic.

“Tsuyoshi!” she cried out, her throat dry. Tsuyoshi was the enforcer, the bouncer who maintained order in the parlour. But there was no reply.

“I’m afraid Tsuyoshi will not be coming,” the man with the limp chuckled, his voice dripping with malice. “This section of Shibuya now belongs to me. Tsuyoshi will not be coming to your rescue. And neither will Ken Watanabe.”

The mention of Ken’s name sent a jolt through Sayuri, her heart jumped in her throat, as the room felt smaller, closing in around her.

“What do you want?” she managed to ask, forcing herself to meet his gaze despite the fear swirling within. The man took a step closer, his limp exaggerated, dominating the cramped space.

“I want you to understand your place here. You’re no longer working for the Yamaguchi-gumi. You’ll be working for us now – the Mitsui-kai.”

Sayuri’s breath caught in her throat. “Never!” she said, trying to sound resolute, though she could hear her voice tremble slightly.

He laughed, a harsh, mocking sound that echoed off the walls. “You think you have a choice? You’ve built your life in the shadows of this world. It’s time to embrace it. We can make you very comfortable... or very uncomfortable.”

The threat hung in the air, thick and suffocating. Sayuri’s mind raced through the implications. She had seen what happened to those who defied the Mitsui-kai, and the haunting images replayed in her mind—violence, betrayal, and despair. As she stared into the man’s cold eyes, she knew she was standing on the precipice of a decision that could change everything.

"I don't want any trouble," Sayuri said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Just let me go."

The man leaned in closer, his face inches from hers, the stench of stale cigarettes and malice filling the air. "You're already in trouble, Sayuri. The longer you resist, the worse it will be for you."

A surge of anger mixed with fear coursed through her veins. "I'm not afraid of you," she asserted, her voice steadier than she felt, each word a fragile shield against the looming threat. He straightened, a glimmer of approval flickering in his eyes.

"That's the spirit. But bravado won't save you. We know everything about you. Your family, your friends... and Ken. You wouldn't want anything to happen to any of them, would you?"

Her heart sank at the implications, the knot of anxiety tightening in her stomach. The thought of Ken or her family caught in the crossfire of this dangerous game sent a wave of nausea through her.

"Leave them out of this," she demanded, her voice rising with desperation.

The man chuckled, a cruel smile spreading across his face.

"That's entirely up to you, Sayuri. Comply, and you might find that we can be quite generous. Resist, and you'll discover just how ruthless we can be."

The threat hung in the air like a storm cloud, heavy and ominous.

"What do you want from me? What if I refuse?" Sayuri roared defiantly, the fire in her eyes igniting.

"Just tell me you are refusing to work for me and you will find out," the man with the limp replied, his tone sinister.

"This is Ken's territory. You have no say here!" Sayuri shouted, her voice echoing with conviction.

"Wrong! Yoshinori Watanabe, the *kumicho*, has given me this block of the Yamaguchi-gumi's operations in Shibuya in return for a favour I did for him," he retorted, a smugness in his demeanour.

"That's impossible!" Sayuri shot back. "I know every one of Ken's associates in this area. I don't know you!"

"I think you might know my name," he responded, a sneer curling his lips. "Maybe Takuya has told you about me?"

"Takuya and I no longer talk," she replied angrily, each word laced with a mix of hurt and defiance.

"Pity. Allow me to introduce myself. Shinji Matsumoto, at your service," he said, giving a mocking bow, the arrogance radiating off him like an unwanted heat.

In that moment, the weight of his identity crashed down on her, the connections intertwining like a web of danger, and Sayuri realized just how deep the stakes had

become. Sayuri went cold as she stared at Shinji Matsumoto, disbelief washing over her like a cold wave. The air around her thickened, and for a moment, the world stood still.

Shinji was the son of Mrs. Matsumoto, her high school teacher, and the realization sent a jolt of recognition through her. Memories of classroom lessons and the warmth of that familial connection flickered in her mind, clashing violently with the grim reality of their current situation. But it wasn't just that—he was also the son of the bank Chairman, the very man to whom she had delivered a message that had led to a brutal act of *yubitsume*. The implications of her actions hung heavy in the air, a suffocating reminder of her past decisions.

As she processed this information, her thoughts spiralled further into chaos. She recalled the night Takuya had come back; his hands stained with blood after cutting Shinji's Achilles heels. It had been a result of her misguided words—she had told Ken that Shinji had betrayed him, a lie that had cost Shinji dearly. The loyalty Takuya had shown to Ken now felt like a dagger in her heart, twisting painfully as she faced the consequences of her choices.

"Shinji..." she whispered, her voice trembling, caught between guilt and shock. The weight of their shared history crashed down on her, and she felt as if the ground beneath her was crumbling away. The room spun as the reality of his presence sank in—this was someone whose life had been irrevocably altered by her actions. The air was thick with tension, and in that moment, she realized that their fates were intertwined in a way she could never have anticipated.

"Yes. Shinji Matsumoto - your worst nightmare," he cackled, the cruel amusement in his voice cutting through her turmoil like a knife. His eyes gleamed with a twisted satisfaction, relishing the power he held over her.

Sayuri's breath caught in her throat, a mix of fear and anger surging within her.

"You don't have to do this," she pleaded, desperation creeping into her voice. "We can find another way."

"Another way?" he echoed, incredulity lacing his tone. "There's no other way, Sayuri. You've made your choices, and now you'll face the consequences."

He stepped closer, the distance between them shrinking as the shadows of the parlour seemed to close in around her. In that moment, the toll of her past decisions bore down on her, and she realized that the path ahead was fraught with danger. As she looked into his eyes, she saw not just a man transformed by pain and betrayal, but a reflection of her own mistakes—an inescapable reminder of the chaos her life had become.

"Ryo! Yoshiki!" Shinji beckoned his muscle. They burst through the door, moving swiftly, grabbing hold of Sayuri with a force that left her no room to escape. Panic surged through her as she kicked and screamed, but her cries fell on deaf ears, swallowed by the oppressive atmosphere of the dimly lit parlour. In a brutal instant, one of the men slapped her hard across the face, stunning her into silence. The world around her began to blur, and she felt herself losing consciousness as the harsh reality of her situation crashed down on her.

They held her down on the massage table, the cold surface pressing against her skin, and she felt a deep sense of dread as Shinji began to undo his belt, a chilling smirk curling on his lips. Desperation clawed at her throat as she fought against the darkness threatening to envelop her.

CHAPTER 49

Sayuri settled into her routine in Poi Pet, the vibrant energy of the compound humming around her. After three weeks of rigorous training in Phnom Penh, the transition felt both exhilarating and exhausting.

Her work hours stretched from 7 am to 5pm, and the strict rules meant she couldn't leave the compound at all. Yet, the food was surprisingly good, and the camaraderie among the staff—comprised entirely of Japanese men—added a unique flavour to her day. They often gathered for drinking sessions after work, laughter and clinking glasses echoing through the halls, a comforting reminder of her life in Japan, a place she used to call home.

As she moved through her tasks, Sayuri found herself too busy to dwell on missing Richard. The long hours, while gruelling, were familiar territory for her as a Japanese worker. Compared to her previous job in web design, where she often felt stifled by language barriers and the pressure to perform, this felt like a breath of fresh air. The money was excellent, and she revelled in the ease of speaking Japanese all day, no longer struggling to articulate her thoughts in English.

Love is just another addiction, she mused one evening, the thought surfacing as she sipped a cold beer with her colleagues. It was a strange comfort, the way she could detach herself from the emotional highs and lows that had once consumed her. *Once you wean yourself off the feel-good drugs and hormones that accompany being in love, you can kick the habit*, she told herself.

Although she still thought of Richard some nights, their texts had transformed into something more sterile, lacking the intimacy they once shared. The messages felt more like friendly check-ins than expressions of love.

How's work?

Food is good.

Hope you're well.

They had drifted into a rhythm that mirrored the steady pulse of her new life. As she laughed with her coworkers and enjoyed the routine, Sayuri realized that she was adapting, finding joy in the present despite the absence of the fervour she once felt. The intoxicating rush of love had faded, replaced by a sense of stability that was oddly comforting, and for the first time in a long while, she felt a sense of peace within herself.

Sayuri was beginning to wonder if she would still leave Cambodia after two months as planned. One of her Japanese co-workers was very cute and definitely interested in her. She had been open and honest with Richard about her fidelity whilst in Cambodia. They had given each other permission to sleep with other people, so that aspect was sorted. However, the Chinese bosses had a strict rule about sex between co-workers. Anyone caught having sex in the compound would have one month's salary deducted. So far, her physical needs had not reached the point where she was willing to work for free for one month, although the temptation was growing daily.

Richard, on the other hand, did not seem to be coping quite as well as she was. The other night he had texted her asking if she would be able to meet him if he came to Poi Pet for the weekend. She had said no. He had not argued, but she could tell that he was deeply disappointed. There were only a couple of weeks left before she had to decide whether or not to stick to her original decision to work in Cambodia for only two months, or return to Nong Pai. Already, Takuya – who was now back in Bangkok – had been texting her daily, asking for her decision. It was Takuya’s responsibility to recruit Japanese citizens to work in Cambodia and he spent a lot of his time hanging out in Japanese restaurants in Sukhumvit and Ploenchit in Bangkok.

Sayuri lay in bed in the small room she shared with the only other female in the compound, a woman from Japan in her 50s who had been working there for many years. She appreciated her roommate’s respectful nature; unlike the backpackers she had encountered in various hostels during her travels, this woman valued Sayuri’s privacy and quiet time. They both followed the unspoken rules of cleanliness, leaving their shoes at the door and washing their bedding every couple of days. It created a serene atmosphere, a small sanctuary in the midst of the compound’s bustling routine.

Sayuri woke with a throbbing headache, the remnants of another Friday night’s revelry swirling in her mind. As she lay in bed, she couldn’t help but rationalize her hangover as a necessary counterbalance to the joy she’d experienced—the laughter shared over cold beers and the flirtatious banter with her colleagues. She chuckled softly to herself, recognizing that everything enjoyable in life came with a cost, whether it was the ache in her head or the fleeting nature of those moments. It was a familiar cycle - the thrill of male attention and the warmth of camaraderie had their price - and today, that price was a dull, persistent reminder of the previous night’s indulgence.

As she stared at the ceiling, lying alone in the dim light, Sayuri found that this was one of the few moments she allowed herself to think of Richard. She missed cuddling with him in bed, the warmth of his body beside hers, the comfort of shared breaths in the stillness of the night. Here in Poi Pet, there was no cat to curl up with either, just the quiet hum of the compound that felt both familiar and isolating.

She hadn’t yet decided whether to stay in Poi Pet or return to Nong Pai. If the salary wasn’t as good as it was, she knew she would have already packed her bags.

The one thing gnawing at her was the lack of freedom—the long walks she used to take around Nong Pai, the ability to work her own hours, to feel the sun on her face without restrictions. Now, the compound was beginning to feel like a prison—albeit a VIP prison—with good food and abundant alcohol, but still a cage nonetheless. Yet, despite her restlessness, Sayuri leaned toward working one more month, hoping to build a financial cushion while she searched for other opportunities, ideally a job she could do from home.

Nong Pai felt like her true home in Thailand, and she had no intention of breaking up with Richard. Still, doubts crept in. Would the spark still be there when she returned? If she returned? Life was unpredictable; shit happened, and she knew that all too well. As she turned onto her side, these thoughts troubled her, making her anxious.

Adding to her anxiety was the fact that she had been unable to reach her daughter, Naomi, for the last 2 days. She had enrolled in an exchange program at KGU University and Sayuri knew that she would be travelling from her shared apartment in Yokohama to Kobe soon to get settled into the dormitory before the course commenced. Sayuri was not too worried – yet. They communicated often, but not always on a daily basis. Naomi was probably busy travelling and Sayuri expected to hear from her soon.

To distract herself from her thoughts, she decided to watch an episode of *The Witcher* on Netflix. Henry Cavill was the John Travolta of her generation, is what she had told Richard when he had asked her what it was about the show that made her a fan. He was more into action and comedy than fantasy, and he had spent many nights watching stand-up comedians on Netflix when they were living together.

“Life is too serious and laughter is the best medicine,” he had told her once.

Sayuri lay on her bed in the dim light of her room, her laptop perched on her thighs as she lost herself in the latest episode of her Netflix series. The familiar glow of the screen was comforting, a small escape from the confines of the compound.

Just as she settled deeper into the story, her phone pinged, breaking the momentary tranquillity. Thinking it was either Naomi or Richard, she swiftly picked it up from the bed, her heart racing with the anticipation of a message. Unlocking it, she saw a LINE notification from Naomi's phone,

Sayuri-chan. Guess who I am with right now?

The cryptic message sent shivers down her spine, an unsettling chill creeping through her.

Who is this? she typed frantically, her fingertips tapping away as if the urgency of her words could somehow dispel the dread pooling in her stomach.

An old friend, came the reply, punctuated by three laughing emojis that felt like daggers to her heart.

Sayuri's mind raced. Someone had managed to get hold of Naomi's phone, and the implications sent her spiralling into a state of alarm. Who was this person, and what did they want? She could only imagine that whoever it was, they were up to no good. *What do I do?* she thought, heart pounding in her chest.

Let me speak to my daughter, she texted in desperation, her breath hitching as she hit send.

Now, why would I let you do that, Sayuri-chan? the reply came, dripping with mockery.

I need to know if she is OK, Sayuri persisted, her fingers shaking.

She is perfectly safe, Sayuri-chan. Why would I harm MY OWN DAUGHTER!!!

The chilling reply felt like ice water coursing through her veins, and she recoiled from the screen, her mind filled with worst-case scenarios. Fear clawed at her throat, and she could feel the walls of the compound closing in. She needed to act, to find out what was happening and ensure Naomi's safety. But the weight of uncertainty hung heavily over

her, making every second feel like an eternity. Desperation fuelled her as she considered her next move, knowing she had to tread carefully in this precarious situation.

There was only one person it could be. She paused momentarily, composing herself before responding. She had to remain calm. Her daughter was in danger. *Think Sayuri!*

I'm willing to cooperate with whatever you want, but I need to hear Naomi's voice first. It's a simple request, she finally texted back, expressing a willingness to co-operate.

After an agonising minute with no response, her phone rang, startling her. She quickly presses the green button.

"Mom! Thank God you picked up!" Naomi exclaims, her tone frantic. "I'm okay, but you need to listen to me carefully. I'm with someone— a guy called Shinji. Him and two other guys kidnapped me off the street and blindfolded me – I don't know where I am or what he wants. He's been acting strange, and I'm scared."

There's a brief pause as Naomi takes a shaky breath. "Please, don't panic. I think he's trying to use you to get to me. Just promise me you won't make any sudden moves or do anything reckless."

Naomi's voice softened, a hint of vulnerability breaking through.

"I miss you so much, Mom. I wish I could be there with you. Just... please be careful. I don't want anything to ..." And then she was gone, and another voice came on the line, a voice she still heard in her nightmares.

"She's fine, as you can hear," Shinji's voice rasped, involuntarily causing Sayuri to tremble. Sayuri gripped her phone tightly. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead and her throat was as dry as toast.

"What do you want, Shinji?" she asked, her voice trembling with a mix of fear and anger.

The realization that Naomi didn't know who Shinji was gnawed at her. The way her daughter had spoken during their brief conversation indicated confusion; she likely thought some crazy man had kidnapped her, completely unaware of the twisted connection between them. Sayuri had told Naomi that her father was a guy named Hitori, who had died in a car crash just before she was born.

The memory of that fateful day in 2002 flooded back—the moment Shinji had limped into the massage parlour with his two henchmen. It had been the worst day of her life, plunging her into a world of chaos and fear.

After being brutally raped by Shinji, she had reluctantly agreed to work for him, trapped in a situation she felt powerless to escape. But when she discovered she was pregnant soon after, everything had changed. Sayuri never once considered aborting her baby, even though she was the product of a brutal attack by a man she despised.

Like most young girls, she had dreamed of marrying a good man, starting a family, and living happily ever after. But once she found herself trapped in the purgatory of a Yakuza massage parlour, those dreams had faded away. Naomi was not Shinji, and none of this was her fault.

Once Sayuri had become pregnant, her maternal instincts had surged to the fore, compelling her to sacrifice everything to provide her child with a decent upbringing. Desperate to break free, Sayuri had fled in the dead of night, boarding a train to Minamiboso with nothing more than a backpack filled with clothes and toiletries. She had hoped the Yakuza wouldn't find her there, seeking refuge in the anonymity of a new town. The first few nights had been rough, but she had managed to find work in a ramen shop, grateful for Japan's wonderful healthcare system when Naomi was born in the local public hospital in 2003.

For seven long years, Sayuri had dedicated herself to providing for her daughter, forsaking relationships and intimacy to ensure Naomi had everything she needed. Their bond was strong, forged through the challenges of single parenthood. Yet, the disapproving looks from the elderly residents of Minamiboso—where unmarried mothers were stigmatized as *higaisha*—only fuelled her determination to work harder and shield her daughter from judgment.

"I want you to suffer," came Shinji's reply. "I want you to regret all the pain you have caused me. I want to take away your happiness – just like you took mine!" he frothed.

"Shinji, whatever happened between us does not involve Naomi. She wasn't even born. Please, let her go! We can find a way to settle this - just the two of us! Please!" Sayuri begged, almost in tears.

"Now, why would I do that?" sneered Shinji. "I think I would like to spend some quality time with her. She's a very pretty girl – just like you were."

Sayuri went cold at the words. Shinji was capable of anything. She knew that firsthand. "Shinji, please, I beg of you. Let Naomi go. I will come to Japan and you can take me prisoner, or whatever you want to do, but please let Naomi go! A straight swap – me for Naomi. OK? Please!"

"I don't think so. I want to get to know my daughter better. I just thought I would let you know that your beautiful daughter and I will be doing everything together from now on. We're going to bond. I'm sure she will be quite happy to get to know her father," Shinji said sarcastically, twisting the verbal knife he had already plunged into Sayuri's heart. Her hands trembled as she gripped the phone as she listened to Shinji's cold laughter echoing in her ear.

"Please, Shinji," she pleaded, desperation spilling from her voice. "Let her go. She's just a child. She didn't do anything to you!"

"Oh, but she's my daughter," he replied, a twisted glee in his tone. "And you never told me. You kept her from me. Goodbye Sayuri-chan!"

Before she could respond, the line went dead. Sayuri stared at her phone in disbelief, panic surging through her. She took a deep breath, fighting to steady herself, and quickly dialled Takuya's number, tears stinging her eyes.

"Takuya! I need your help! Shinji has kidnapped Naomi! I don't know what to do! I..."

“Slow down, Sayuri-chan! Take a breath! Tell me everything, from the beginning,” Takuya’s voice was calm, a lifeline in her storm of panic.

Sayuri explained everything, detailing the chilling phone call and Shinji’s cruel laughter. As she spoke, she could feel Takuya’s steady presence guiding her through the chaos.

“Okay, listen to me,” he said firmly once she finished. “I’ll book a plane for you to Bangkok for tomorrow. We’ll meet at my apartment. We’ll make a plan of action.”

“I... I can’t just leave. What about my job? What about Naomi?” she stammered.

“Don’t worry about money,” he reassured her. “I’ll cover your salary for the remaining few weeks that you won’t be working at the compound. I’ll also take care of any expenses we incur while we save Naomi from Shinji.”

Relief washed over her, mingling with the anxiety still gripping her heart. “Thank you, Takuya. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Just focus on getting here safely. We’ll figure this out together,” he said, his voice unwavering.

As they hung up, Sayuri felt a flicker of hope ignite within her. She wasn’t alone in this fight, and for the first time since receiving that call, she believed there was a chance to bring Naomi home.

Sayuri sat on the edge of her bed, her mind in turmoil. The thought of Naomi in danger at the hands of Shinji twisted like a knife in her gut. Sleep felt impossible, the weight of her worry pressing down on her. She took a few moments to compose herself, drawing in deep breaths, then decided to take action. She needed to keep busy, to feel like she was doing something.

With a resolute nod, she picked up her phone and dialled Richard’s number. It felt important to let him know what was happening, especially since she would be leaving for Japan. This wasn’t a call for help; it was a courtesy, a way to show she cared. She had long ago resolved to be truthful with him, no matter how painful the truth might be. No games, no lies. That way, everyone knew where they stood, and there were no unpleasant surprises.

“Hello, baby. Good to hear your voice. How are things going in Cambodia?” Richard’s cheerful tone warmed her heart, but it felt so out of place in her current situation.

“Hi. Listen, I have something very important to tell you. Please listen carefully, okay?” Sayuri said, her voice steady but tinged with urgency.

“Okay, baby. What’s the problem?” he replied, concern creeping into his tone.

“I will be going to Japan in a couple of days. I don’t know how long I will be there,” she told him, her heart sinking as she spoke the words.

“Japan? Is your mother sick? Tell me what’s going on. Maybe I can help,” Richard offered, his voice laced with worry.

“No, it’s not my mother. It’s my daughter, Naomi. She is in trouble,” Sayuri explained, her breath catching as the reality of the situation settled in.

“Oh no!” Richard exclaimed, the concern in his voice deepening. “Naomi! Did she have an accident? What happened, baby?”

Sayuri hesitated, the words feeling heavy on her tongue. “It’s complicated, and I can’t go into all the details right now. Just know that she’s missing and probably in danger, and I need to be there for her.”

“Sayuri, I’m here for you. Whatever you need, just tell me. I can help!” Richard insisted, his voice full of urgency.

“I appreciate that, but this is something I have to handle myself,” she said softly, fighting to keep her emotions in check. “I just wanted you to know where I’d be. I care about you, and I didn’t want you to think I was disappearing without explanation.”

“Of course, I understand,” he replied, though she could hear the frustration in his voice. “Just promise me you’ll stay safe.”

“I promise,” Sayuri said, though she wasn’t sure how true that promise would be. They exchanged a few more words, their conversation a painful reminder of the bond they shared and the distance between them.

The shadows of uncertainty loomed over her. As she hung up, she felt a dark cloud of dread forming in her mind, knowing that she was about to step back into a world it seemed she could never escape.

Sayuri opened her FIND MY app, her hands trembling slightly as she typed in Naomi’s number. The screen flickered momentarily before displaying a location:

1 Chome-3-6 Motomachidori, Chuo Ward, Kobe, Hyogo 650-0022, Japan.

A surge of anxiety washed over her. For 21 years, she had managed to keep Naomi safe from the Yakuza, but now her past had caught up with her once again. *How had Shinji found her?*

The app indicated it was “accurate to within 15 metres,” but in a bustling area like Kobe’s Chinatown, that could mean hundreds—perhaps even thousands—of people nearby. Still, it was a start.

With her heart still racing, she quickly sent the information to Takuya. Moments later, her phone buzzed with his reply:

Thank you for the info. Our flight is booked for tomorrow night—midnight flight to Tokyo.

Before she could process his message, another text came through:

I think it’s best to go to Tokyo first to get some reinforcements. Strength in numbers.

As she scribbled down the flight details, her mind racing with possible next steps, a sharp knock on her bedroom door startled her. It was the main Chinese partner, Mr. Lee, his expression serious as he stepped inside.

“I speak Takuya,” he said in halting English. “No problem. You go. Ten o’ clock. Deliver – go airport. OK?”

“OK. Thank you,” said a subdued Sayuri.

CHAPTER 50

Sayuri and Takuya sat in Takuya's VIP suite in the Shibuya Granbell Hotel, the city's neon lights creating a vibrant display through the expansive windows. The suite was luxurious, befitting Takuya's status as the top dog for the Yakuza in Thailand, but the opulence felt distant to Sayuri as she wrestled with the seriousness of their situation. Takuya leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers as he considered their next move.

"What are your thoughts on telling Ken Watanabe about this, Sayuri-chan? The three of us are the reason why Shinji is out for revenge. He knew he could never beat Ken and his Yamaguchi-gumi muscle, which is why he kidnapped Naomi. Shall we talk to Ken?"

Sayuri's gaze drifted to the bustling streets below, her heart heavy with memories. "I haven't spoken to Ken in many years," she replied, her voice flat and devoid of emotion. "I'm not sure where we stand at this point. He was my lover, then my boss, and then I disappeared. Why do you think he can help?"

Takuya studied her, noting the tension in her posture. "Because he has resources, connections. He's still a powerful figure in the Yakuza. If anyone can find out where Shinji is hiding, it's Ken."

Sayuri remained silent, the memories flooding back—passionate nights filled with laughter, followed by the sharp sting of betrayal and loss.

"But it's been so long," she murmured, feeling the weight of unresolved feelings. "What if he doesn't want to help me? Or worse, what if he blames me for everything that's happened?"

Takuya leaned forward; his expression serious. "This isn't just about the past, Sayuri. This is about Naomi. We can't let Shinji get away with this. You know Ken better than anyone. If there's a chance he can help, we have to take it."

She sighed, the turmoil within her battling against the urgency of their situation, the weight of their mission pressing heavily on her shoulders. She took a deep breath, ready to share her unconventional idea.

"Before we talk to Ken, I have a long-shot plan that I want to try."

Takuya raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued. "What is it?"

"Did I ever tell you that Shinji's mother was one of my teachers in middle school?" Sayuri started, her voice steady but laced with nostalgia.

"No, I don't recall you telling me that," Takuya replied slowly, intrigued by the unexpected turn of the conversation.

"Well, she was. I really liked her," Sayuri continued, her mind drifting back to those formative years. "She found out about that day we went to see the bank Chairman—I'm sure you remember that day. It was my first assignment for Ken."

“Yes, how could I forget that day?” Takuya smiled wistfully, recalling the tension and excitement of the moment. “You had to wait for a package from the bank Chairman.”

“Exactly,” Sayuri said, her expression turning serious. “Well, Mrs. Matsumoto, Shinji’s mother, met with me one day after school. She had figured out that I was the young girl who had visited her husband at work and walked out of the office with his finger in a box. I thought she was going to be angry, but she said that she understood. She gave me her phone number and told me to call her if I ever needed help.”

Takuya’s interest deepened, realizing the potential in her connection.

“So, you think she might be able to help us?”

“I know it sounds like a long shot,” Sayuri admitted, “but she was always kind to me. If anyone could get through to Shinji, it might be her. She’s his mother, after all. Maybe she could persuade him to release Naomi.”

Takuya leaned back, considering the possibility. “It’s worth a try. If Mrs. Matsumoto still cares for her son, she might have the influence to reach him. Plus, you have a history with her. It could help establish trust.”

Sayuri nodded, feeling a mix of hope and apprehension.

“I’ll call her. It’s a risk, but it might be our best chance. I just hope she’s willing to listen. But first, I need to phone my mom.”

“Your mom?” quizzed Takuya.

“Yes. You’ll understand. Just listen, but don’t talk, OK?” warned Sayuri.

Sayuri took a deep breath and dialled her mother’s landline number, her nerves fraying, despite the familiarity of the action. She much preferred texting—less pressure, an easy way out. But this was an emergency, and she needed her mother’s help.

“Hi Mom. How are you doing?” she started, forcing a lightness into her voice.

On the other end, Takuya watched her intently. He could see Sayuri’s expression remain neutral as she listened, nodding occasionally in agreement. He found it interesting how some people talked on the phone as if they could be seen; he, himself, often talked with his hands while on the phone - animated like an excited Italian.

“I’m happy to hear that Keiko is having a grandchild, Mom. You’re going to be a great-grandmother soon,” Sayuri said, her voice warm but distant. Takuya noticed how her mother’s voice filled the space, a stream of chatter that seemed to overflow with excitement. It was clear Sayuri’s mother was lonely and grateful for any connection with her youngest daughter, even if that daughter was labelled a *higisha*.

“Wow! That’s fantastic, Mom!” Sayuri injected a note of artificial enthusiasm as her mother announced Atsuko’s new flower business. It was a fantastic development, but right now, Sayuri’s mind was filled with thoughts of Naomi and the looming threat of Shinji. Finally, after what felt like an eternity of listening to her mother babble about her sisters, Sayuri found a moment to interject.

“Listen, Mom,” she began, her tone shifting from polite interest to urgency. “Do you still have my *yume no hon*?”

There was a pause on the other end, a moment of confusion punctuated by silence. Takuya could almost see her mother’s brow furrow in thought, and he leaned forward, eager to hear the response. Sayuri’s expression remained serious, the weight of her current situation pressing heavily on her shoulders. She hoped her mother still had the chart – she had tucked Mrs. Matsumoto’s phone number in her dream chart for safekeeping.

“I should still have it, Sayuri-chan. I never throw anything away. You know, sometimes I go through the boxes that you girls left behind. Such good memories. You were so smart and talented, Sayuri-chan,” Yoko Ichikawa reminisced. Sayuri knew that her mother had just given her a ‘backhand’ compliment, seemingly innocent on the surface, but with an underlying accusation that Sayuri had squandered her vast potential.

“I’m sorry to trouble you mom, but do you mind going to look for it now. It’s urgent. I’ll explain later. Please go see if you still have it and I’ll phone back in 30 minutes, OK?” Sayuri instructed.

“Hai! I will do that now. Speak soon. Bye Sayuri-chan,” her mother replied.

“Thank you, mom. Speak shortly. Bye,” Sayuri ended the conversation.

Sayuri paced the floor as she waited for the 30 minutes to elapse. As she waited, she suddenly felt nostalgic. The dream chart represented so much—innocence, aspirations, and the woman she once dreamed of becoming. Now, it felt like a lifeline. She glanced across at Takuya lounging on the couch, his eyes focused on the cityscape outside, but he turned to her suddenly as her phone began to ring. It had only been 20 minutes. Sayuri quickly answered.

“Sayuri-chan, good news!” her mother’s voice chimed through the line, brimming with excitement. “I found your dream chart. It’s so beautiful. Such big dreams you had,” she added, a hint of wistfulness in her tone.

Sayuri felt a familiar defensiveness bubble up at her mother’s biting words. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to remain calm. She loved her mother, but she could be judgemental at times, especially now that she was old and alone. Some might say she was bitter and twisted, but Sayuri figured that all people eventually got old and grumpy. There was no way that she could ever tell her mom about Naomi’s kidnapping. This was something she had to keep from her mom. No need to stress her already fragile heart.

“I’m glad you found it. Now, listen carefully, Mom, okay?”

“Okay, dear,” her mother replied, a slight confusion creeping into her voice.

“Open the chart in the middle. There’s a pop-up of the middle school facade that I made. There’s a cardboard door to the school. Open that door. There should be a piece of paper folded inside,” Sayuri instructed, picturing the cherished chart in her mind.

There was a brief silence on the line, and Sayuri imagined her mother carefully handling the delicate paper, the faint rustle of cardboard filling the air. “Okay, Sayuri-chan, I found the piece of paper,” her mother said, her voice tinged with intrigue.

“Well done. Now unfold the piece of paper. There should be a phone number written on it,” Sayuri continued, her heart beating with anticipation.

“Just a moment,” her mother replied, and Sayuri could hear the sound of paper being unfolded. The silence stretched between them, thick with the weight of memories and unspoken words.

“Ah, here it is! There’s a number!” her mother exclaimed, the excitement returning to her voice.

“Great! That’s the number for Mrs. Matsumoto,” Sayuri explained, her mind racing with the implications. “She was my teacher, and I need to reach her. It’s important.”

“Mrs. Matsumoto? The one from middle school?” her mother asked, a hint of surprise in her tone.

“Yes, exactly,” Sayuri affirmed.

“She is even older than me,” quipped Yoko, Sayuri’s mom.

“Please read out the number, mom,” Sayuri gently prodded.

“Okay, one moment, dear...three, five, four, five, seven, two, six, eight, one. That’s it,” Yoko said proudly, as if she had just won a spelling bee.

“Thank you, Mom. I’ll call her right away. I really appreciate your help,” Sayuri said, a warmth spreading in her chest despite the tension of the moment.

“I’m always here for you, Sayuri-chan. Just remember that,” her mother replied, her voice softer now.

“I know, Mom. I’ll talk to you soon,” Sayuri said before hanging up, determination flooding her veins. She turned to Takuya, who had been quietly listening, and nodded. “Now it’s time to make that call.”

Sayuri’s felt a bit flustered as she dialled the number she had just retrieved from her mother. The phone rang, each beep intensifying her anxiety. Finally, a woman answered.

“Hello. Matsumoto residence.”

“Mrs. Matsumoto? Hello. This is Sayuri Ichikawa. I was one of your students in middle school a long time ago,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

“Hello, Sayuri. My name is Kobayashi, Miyuki. I am Mrs. Matsumoto’s daughter,” came the reply. Sayuri’s breath caught in her throat; she hadn’t expected the daughter to answer. Technically, she was Naomi’s aunt.

“Sumimasen. I was trying to get hold of your mother. Does she still live there?” Sayuri asked, her stomach knotting with unease.

"I'm sorry, Sayuri. My mother passed away a few years back. I live here with my husband and kids now. Is there anything I can help you with?" Miyuki offered kindly. Sayuri hesitated, a wave of sorrow washing over her at the news.

"So sorry for your loss. Your mother was always kind to me. Actually, there might be something you can do for me. It is urgent. Can I come and see you at home? Or maybe we can meet in a public place near you if that suits you better?" she probed, her heart racing.

"It sounds serious. Are you okay?" Miyuki asked, concern lacing her tone.

"I'd rather not say anything on the phone if you don't mind, Miyuki-San. This is a really important matter, and as I said, it is urgent that we meet. Today, if possible," Sayuri insisted, the urgency in her voice unmistakable.

There was a brief pause, and Sayuri could almost hear Miyuki weighing her options. "Alright, I understand. How about we meet at the café near my house? It's a good spot, and I think it'll be quiet enough for us to talk."

"Thank you, that sounds perfect. What's the name of the café? And which area of Tokyo," quizzed Sayuri.

"Hummingbird coffee shop, Meguro City," replied Miyuki.

"What time?" Sayuri asked, relief flooding through her.

"Can you be there in about half an hour?" Miyuki suggested.

"I will try. But I might be ten minutes late. I'm on the other side of Shibuya now. Please just wait. OK?" Sayuri pleaded.

"No problem Sayuri San. I will wait. See you shortly," Miyuki said.

"I'll be there," Sayuri confirmed, her determination solidifying. As they exchanged goodbyes, she felt a mix of hope and trepidation. This meeting could be the key to reaching Naomi, and she was ready to do whatever it took to save her daughter. As she hung up the phone, she turned to Takuya, her resolve clear.

"I'm meeting Miyuki at a café in Meguro City in half an hour. We need to move quickly," Sayuri relayed to Takuya, who was sprawled out on the sofa.

"Sayuri-chan, I don't think it is wise for me to go with. It might spook her. You don't need me for this. You got this. OK?" Takuya voiced his thoughts.

"You're right Takuya. I should do this alone. Good thinking. What will you do?"

"I will make a few phone calls. See if I can get any info off the Yakuza grapevine," Takuya explained.

"OK. But please don't phone Ken yet. Let me see how this meeting goes first, OK?" Sayuri requested.

"Understood, Sayuri-chan. You had better get moving if you want to make your meeting," suggested Takuya.

“Yes, I’m on my way. Meet you back here after. Don’t disappear,” Sayuri instructed as she headed for the hotel room door.

Sayuri stepped out of the Shibuya Granbell Hotel, the bustling city enveloping her as she hailed a taxi. The driver nodded and pulled up, and she slipped inside, her heart filled with anticipation. The ride to Hummingbird Coffee Shop in Meguro City felt both fleeting and eternal, each passing minute heightening her anxiety about meeting Miyuki, Shinji’s sister.

Arriving at the café, Sayuri paid the fare and rushed inside. She quickly scanned the room and spotted a booth for two in the corner. Miyuki was sitting there, patiently waiting, her demeanour calm and inviting. As Sayuri stood by the door, unsure, Miyuki waved her hand in the air, signalling her over. Sayuri had always thought that Naomi resembled her more than Shinji, but as she approached the booth, she was struck by the resemblance between Miyuki and Naomi, her niece. They shared some similar features—eyes, nose, and the curve of their lips—yet it was distinct enough to send a shiver down Sayuri’s spine.

“Miyuki-San?” she asked, pausing at the edge of the booth for confirmation.

“Hai! Please sit,” Miyuki replied warmly, her smile reassuring.

Sayuri slid into the booth opposite Miyuki, feeling a bit apprehensive. “Would you like to order something?” Miyuki offered; her tone friendly.

“Hai! I’m dying for some coffee,” Sayuri admitted, glancing around for a waitress. She spotted one and signalled, placing her order for coffee and a bran muffin. As they waited, Miyuki engaged in small talk.

“So, you were one of my mom’s students?”

“Hai! A long time ago,” Sayuri replied shyly. She wasn’t a natural conversationalist, especially not under such tense circumstances.

“I won’t ask you your age—that would be rude—but you look about my age. I don’t remember you from school,” Miyuki continued, her curiosity evident.

“I never went to high school. I finished middle school in 1991,” Sayuri explained, her voice barely above a whisper. She caught the fleeting look on Miyuki’s face, one that suggested judgment for being a *shūgaku shitsugai*—a school dropout.

Miyuki seemed to sense Sayuri’s discomfort and quickly added, “Oh! I’m sorry! I’m not judging you. You look intelligent. But I guess I made an assumption that all intelligent people finished school. Sorry again,” she apologized, her sincerity evident.

Sayuri felt a small wave of gratitude for Miyuki’s kindness, even if the conversation was still awkward. “Thank you,” she said softly, appreciating the attempt to bridge the gap between them. “I had my reasons for leaving school.”

Just then, the waitress arrived with her coffee and muffin, a welcome distraction. Sayuri took a sip, the warmth spreading through her, and felt a flicker of hope. She needed this meeting to go well; for Naomi’s sake, she had to make it work.

“What did you want to discuss? It sounds quite urgent,” Miyuki began, her expression shifting to one of curiosity and concern.

“It’s about your brother, Shinji,” Sayuri replied, watching Miyuki’s face intently. Over the years, she had learned that most people—especially in Japan—often said words that didn’t quite align with their true feelings. It was a deep-seated cultural norm, a way of maintaining harmony and respect, but Sayuri had become skilled at reading body language.

At the mention of Shinji, Miyuki’s reaction was immediate. The colour seemed to drain from her face, her eyes widening in shock. “Shinji,” she repeated, her voice barely above a whisper. Sayuri noticed the subtle tightening of her jaw and the way her hands clenched slightly on the table, revealing an underlying blend of fear and contempt.

“Is he okay?” Miyuki continued, her tone betraying her struggle to maintain composure. Sayuri sensed a flicker of something darker beneath her aunt’s concern—an unspoken tension that spoke volumes.

“Not exactly,” Sayuri said carefully, gauging how much to reveal. “He’s involved in something dangerous, and it’s affecting my daughter, Naomi.”

Miyuki’s expression hardened, a flicker of anger flashing in her eyes. “What do you mean? What has he done?”

Sayuri took a deep breath, the weight of her words pressing down on her. “He’s kidnapped Naomi, and I believe it’s an act of revenge. He thinks he can use her to get to me.”

Miyuki recoiled slightly, the shock morphing into a grimace. “I don’t know what to say,” she whispered, her voice trembling with emotion. “He’s always been... unpredictable.”

Sayuri leaned in, her voice firm. “I need your help. You’re his sister. You know him better than anyone. If you can reach him, maybe you can persuade him to let Naomi go.”

Miyuki hesitated, her mind racing. “You don’t understand,” she said, shaking her head slowly. “Shinji is not a normal person. He is wired differently to most people. I haven’t spoken to him since his birthday – I only speak to him once a year. We are not close,” Miyuki explained.

“I actually *do* understand,” Sayuri said, looking deep into Miyuki’s eyes. “Then you know what I’m up against. This isn’t just about family ties; it’s about saving my daughter.”

Miyuki’s expression softened, the fear in her eyes mingling with empathy. “I’ll do what I can,” she said finally, her voice steadier now. “But you need to be careful. He’s dangerous. He has SSD,” Miyuki warned.

“SSD? I am not familiar with that acronym,” said Sayuri, puzzled.

“Sexual Sadism Disorder. It’s when a person repeatedly and intentionally inflicts suffering on a nonconsenting person, to experience sexual excitement,” Miyuki explained.

Sayuri was only slightly shocked by Miyuki's description of Shinji's affliction. She was a victim of Shinji's disorder and she suspected that Miyuki was one too. Sayuri didn't want to dwell on the topic of SSD. She quickly changed the subject.

"You must have his phone number then if you phone him once a year? Is that correct?" Sayuri asked, focusing on the practicalities.

"Yes, that's right. I have his number," confirmed Miyuki.

"OK, great. He contacted me on Naomi's phone. Having his number should prove useful," Sayuri said, glad to be making progress.

Sayuri stood in Takuya's VIP suite at the Shibuya Granbell Hotel, the city lights twinkling outside, a stark contrast to the turmoil inside her. She had just returned from her meeting with Miyuki, and the weight of their conversation lingered in the air.

"Takuya," she began, her voice steady but filled with urgency, "I spoke with Miyuki. She's definitely on our side. She's gone home to pack a few clothes and will be joining us for the train trip to Kobe."

Takuya looked up; interest piqued. "That's great news. Does she live alone?"

"Miyuki mentioned that her husband is very understanding. He thinks Shinji is a horrible and dangerous man, so he won't complain about being left alone for a few days if it means Shinji is finally brought to justice," Sayuri explained, a flicker of hope igniting within her.

"That's reassuring," Takuya replied, nodding. "What have you decided about contacting Ken?"

Sayuri took a deep breath, the memories of past betrayals swirling in her mind.

"I think I must put my emotions aside and speak to him. After Shinji took over his massage parlour in Shibuya, I would guess that Ken has a score to settle with Shinji."

"Well..." Takuya began, his tone cautious.

"Well, what?" Sayuri asked, agitation creeping into her voice. She could sense where this was heading.

"Ultimately, Tomoko is to blame. She set you up with false information, and then you, me, and Ken ended up doing things that changed the course of all our lives," Takuya rationalized.

"That doesn't excuse him for raping me!" Sayuri shouted.

Sayuri immediately regretted losing her cool as soon as the words slipped from her lips. The confession hanging heavy in the air between her and Takuya. She had unintentionally revealed the horrible deed that Shinji had done to her, a secret she had buried deep for far too long. Embarrassment washed over her, cheeks flushing with a mix of shame and vulnerability. Yet, beneath that discomfort lay a profound sense of relief; the truth had finally surfaced, and she no longer had to carry the weight of it

alone. She knew that eventually, it would have come out—this was a battle they were fighting together, and secrets only served to deepen the chasms between them.

As she met Takuya's gaze, she sensed a shift, an unspoken understanding that would strengthen their resolve to confront Shinji and protect Naomi. Sayuri walked to the window and stood with her back to Takuya. She needed to calm down. Anger was never helpful in high stress situations.

“OK. I’m sorry Takuya. I lost my cool,” she said apologetically, still staring out the window at nothing in particular.

“It’s OK, Sayuri-chan. I don’t know what it is like to be a parent. I can only imagine the stress you are experiencing. It’s worse for women, I think. They carry a life within them for 9 months. Men find it easier to understand the concept of infinity than the concept of pregnancy,” Takuya said sympathetically.

“Thank you, Takuya,” Sayuri said, turning to face him and forcing a weak smile.

“It’s all good. Now, what about Ken?” Takuya reminded Sayuri.

“Let’s phone him,” Sayuri said decisively.

“You or me?” quizzed Takuya.

“I’ll do it. I can’t ignore him forever I guess,” she said, resigned to the inevitability of it.

Sayuri took a deep breath, her heart pounding as she dialled the number for Ken Watanabe that Takuya had given her. The phone rang, and when he answered, his familiar voice came through the line.

“Hello? This is Watanabe,” he said, the same way he always had. A smile tugged at Sayuri's lips as memories of her teenage liaison flickered in her mind, a mix of nostalgia and anxiety swirling within her.

“Ken. It's Sayuri,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

There was a slight hesitation before he replied, “Sayuri-chan! I am surprised. You're the last person I expected to hear from. How are you?”

“I could be better. But now is not the time to catch up,” Sayuri said, perhaps a bit too curtly. She could sense the concern brewing on the other end.

“Sayuri-chan. What is the matter? How can I help you?” Ken asked, his tone shifting to one of genuine concern.

“Ken, I really need your help. I am in Tokyo right now. Where are you today? Tokyo?” Sayuri pressed, urgency threading through her words.

“Yes, I am in Tokyo today,” Ken confirmed.

“That’s good news. Can you come to Takuya's suite at the Granbell? Like now? Can you do that? Please?” Sayuri pleaded, her voice tinged with desperation.

“Of course, Sayuri-chan. I'll be there in 10 minutes, OK?” Ken replied, his tone reassuring.

“Thank you, Ken,” Sayuri said, relief washing over her as she hung up the phone. She felt a mix of gratitude and anxiety; the stakes were high, and she hoped Ken’s arrival would bring the support they desperately needed. As she prepared for his visit, she steeled herself for the conversation ahead, knowing it could change everything.

As Sayuri stood in the suite, anticipation thrumming in her chest, she heard a soft knock on the door.

“I’ll get it,” offered Sayuri, briskly walking to the door.

She opened the door to reveal Ken Watanabe. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of him; the once-handsome man she had known in her youth now appeared frail and weathered. His hair, once thick and dark, had turned a stark white, thinning across his scalp, while deep lines etched his face, telling stories of struggle and time.

In his early 40s, Ken had exuded a powerful charm, his strong build commanding attention in the dim lights of the Cave nightclub where they had met. Now, in his late 70s, he looked every bit his age, the vigour of his prime replaced by a fragile demeanour that shocked Sayuri. It was a stark reminder of how quickly time could change everything, and as she took in his worn figure, she felt a pang of nostalgia mixed with concern.

“Ken San, so good to see you. You’re looking good,” Sayuri lied.

“Sayuri-chan! So nice to see you, my dear! You look as beautiful as ever,” said Ken with genuine affection. “Takuya! Good to see you my old friend,” Ken greeted Takuya with a solid handshake and a pat on the back.

“Ken-San! Welcome! Please, have a seat,” Takuya gestured towards the sofa.

Ken collapsed ungraciously into the low sofa; his knees unable to bend that low.

“This seems serious, Ken said, looking from Sayuri to Takuya and then back to Sayuri. “How can I be of service,” he smiled, showing his dazzling white false teeth.

Sayuri took a deep breath, her pulse quickening as she prepared to tell Ken everything, including the reason she had vanished from Tokyo in 2002.

“Ken,” she began, her voice steady but laced with pain. “I need you to know what happened with Shinji. It’s been haunting me for years. He... he sexually assaulted me.”

Ken’s expression darkened, fury igniting in his eyes. “He raped you?” he said forcefully.

“Yes, that is why I left Tokyo. Shinji impregnated me. I have a daughter, Naomi. She’s 21 now. That is why Takuya and I need your help, Ken. Shinji has kidnapped Naomi,” Sayuri quickly explained.

Ken’s face twisted in anger, his eyes narrowing with a fierce intensity that spoke of deep betrayal and a protective instinct awakened by Sayuri’s revelation.

“That Shinji has always had a black heart,” he said slowly, bitterness creeping into his voice. “I knew that from the first time I met him.”

Takuya, sensing the weight of the moment, leaned in closer. “What happened?” he asked softly.

Ken's gaze shifted to the window, lost in memories. “We sometimes used to go fishing in the Akashi River, outside of Kobe,” he began. “One weekend, it was my cousin Ninja, Shinji, and myself. The three of us were sitting on the riverbank waiting for a bite when a fox came out of the woods, sniffing around for food. Ninja and I ignored it, but Shinji... he said that the fox was going to steal our bait and that he needed to prevent that.”

Sayuri’s heart ached at the sight of Ken—this old man she had once loved—sitting there with sad eyes, a fragile shadow of his former self, burdened by the weight of his memories.

“Then what happened?” Takuya asked gently, respecting Ken’s emotional recollection.

Ken’s voice trembled slightly as he continued, “He lured the fox with one of the fish we were using for bait, putting it at the base of a tree. He hid behind another tree. When the fox came close, he smashed its head in with a rock.”

A profound silence fell over the room, the horror of Ken’s story settling heavily in the air. Sayuri could see the discomfort in Ken’s misty eyes, reflecting a pain that went beyond the act itself. It was a reminder of the darkness that had always lurked within Shinji, a darkness that had now touched their lives in such a devastating way. The three of them sat in silence, bound together by their shared resolve to confront that darkness and seek justice for the wrongs that had been done.

CHAPTER 51

As the sleek N-700 Shinkansen glided smoothly toward Kobe, Sayuri sat between Ken and Takuya, accompanied by three of Ken's Yakuza henchmen; and Miyuki, Shinji's sister. The gentle hum of the train was a stark contrast to the turmoil swirling in her mind. She felt the familiar vibration of her phone and glanced down to see a text from Richard.

Hi baby. How are things going?

For a moment, she felt a pang of guilt. She hadn't thought about Richard since arriving in Japan, caught up in the chaos of tracing Naomi and confronting her past. But the warmth of his message reminded her how important it was to maintain their connection.

I am on my way to Kobe now. I traced Naomi's phone to Chinatown,

she replied, her fingers moving quickly across the screen.

That's great news. Where in Chinatown? Richard responded almost instantly; relief evident in his words.

Suspicion flickered in Sayuri's mind.

Why do you want to know that?" she asked, her brow furrowing slightly.

Because, baby, I want to go on GOOGLE MAPS and look at the area. I have some experience in these matters. Maybe I will see a clue that will help. The more people who are trying to help, the better, don't you think?

She paused, considering his words. Trusting Richard had never been an issue before, but this felt different. Yet, what harm could it do? He genuinely seemed to want to help, and perhaps there was more to him than she knew. After all, she had a secret past of her own, one that she had never shared with him. No doubt, he had pieces of his life that remained unspoken too.

Okay, she typed back, her heart racing with a mix of anxiety and hope. It's 1 Chome-3-6 Motomachidori. I'm not sure how much help you'll be, but thanks for your support hun-nee.

She glanced at Ken, who was engrossed in a conversation with Takuya, oblivious to her exchange. The henchmen shifted slightly, their presence a constant reminder of the stakes involved.

OK, thanks baby. I'll look into it. Be safe. I'll message you again tomorrow. Love you.

As she tucked her phone away, a sense of determination settled over her. With Richard's help, maybe they could piece together a plan. She had always kept her past and her relationships compartmentalized, but now, with everything at stake, perhaps it was time to bridge those gaps. She looked out the window, watching the scenery blur into a tapestry of green and grey, and steeled herself for what lay ahead. As they arrived in Kobe, the cool night air greeted them outside the train station, and they quickly hailed two taxis to take them to the Hotel Meriken Port Kobe Motomachi. The city shimmered

under the glow of streetlights, but the group felt the weight of exhaustion after their long journey.

Each person was assigned their own room, except for the three henchmen, who were crammed into a family room, their laughter echoing faintly as they settled in. It was after midnight, and fatigue hung heavily in the air. Sayuri turned to the group, her voice firm yet gentle, urging everyone to rest.

"We'll meet again at breakfast to discuss our next steps," she said, and one by one, they nodded in agreement. With that, they drifted off to their separate rooms, the promise of a new day ahead mingling with their weariness.

In the early morning light filtering through the curtains of Ken's suite, the group sat around a low table, remnants of breakfast scattered before them. The atmosphere was tense with purpose as they prepared to strategize Naomi's rescue from Shinji. Ken leaned forward; his expression serious.

"I spoke to my uncle last night, Yoshinori Watanabe. As you all know, he was the *kumicho* of the Yamaguchi-gumi until 2005," Ken began, his voice steady.

Sayuri's heart leapt at the prospect of gaining support from such a powerful figure. "What did he say?" she asked, hope flickering in her eyes.

Ken hesitated, a shadow crossing his face. "Well, we are not as close as we used to be, especially after Shinji was gifted one of my blocks in Shibuya by him. In fact, we have hardly spoken since then. But he has been retired for almost 20 years now and is an old man full of regret. So—"

He was abruptly cut off by Takuya. "What did he say?"

Irritation flashed in Ken's eyes at the constant interruptions. "Enough! Please let me finish!"

"Sumimasen," Takuya and Sayuri echoed, their voices subdued.

"He's literally on his deathbed and he wants to 'set things right,' as he said in his own words," Ken continued, his tone grave. "He has spoken to the current *kumicho*, Kenichi Shinoda, who has ordered every Yakuza member in Kobe to be on the lookout for Shinji. He also said that Shinji is now *shinjū*."

Miyuki looked puzzled, her brow furrowing. "What does that mean?"

"*Shinjū* means 'to die together,'" Ken explained, his voice heavy with implication. "It signifies that Shinji has become a target. He's lost the protection of the Yakuza, and anyone associated with him is considered fair game."

The weight of Ken's words settled over the group, a mix of relief and anxiety filling the room. They understood that with this newfound support, the stakes had just risen dramatically in their quest to bring Naomi home.

"OK. So, we have the Kobe Yakuza looking for him. That's good. What else can we do to help find Naomi?" Sayuri took control of the meeting, her voice firm and focused.

“Anybody have any ideas?” she continued, turning to Miyuki, who appeared lost in thought, her brow furrowed in concentration.

“Our family only moved to Tokyo when my father got promoted to bank Chairman,” Miyuki began slowly. “Shinji and I were quite close at one stage, before he turned into a monster. When we were small, we used to hang out in Chinatown on weekends. His dream was always to become a Yakuza gangster. Let me look at Google Maps for a few minutes. Sayuri, come with me.”

Sayuri nodded, following Miyuki to the desk in Ken’s VIP suite. She opened her laptop, the screen illuminating their faces in the dim light.

“Right, Sayuri, show me the address that you got when you tracked Naomi’s phone,” Miyuki instructed. Sayuri quickly pulled up the location, feeling her anxiety rise as she was forced to think about Naomi once more.

“Thanks. Now track her again,” Miyuki instructed. Sayuri obeyed, showing the geolocation co-ordinates to Miyuki as they appeared on her FIND MY app.

Miyuki studied Google Maps intently, her fingers tapping the keys as she navigated the area. After a few moments, she looked up, concern etched on her face. “That’s not the same address as the first time you tracked the phone.”

“Oh! I should have checked that,” Sayuri apologized, a wave of guilt washing over her. “Sorry, it has been difficult to concentrate.” She recognized how pathetic her excuse sounded. This was *her* daughter in danger—nobody else’s. Then she had a thought.

“Miyuki, why don’t we use the app to locate Shinji’s phone?”

“I already tried that last night. It appears he has signed out of Apple ID,” Miyuki replied, looking embarrassed. “Sorry, I forgot to tell you.”

“Oh! OK,” sighed Sayuri. She glanced around the room, a swell of gratitude surging within her; tempering her rising frustration. Somehow, she had managed to assemble a team committed to helping her find Naomi. In the process, she was confronting fears she thought she would never face. Ken, sitting nearby, was a testament to that. She felt thankful that they had a chance to talk before it was too late. It was difficult to discuss old wounds, but it was far better than living with the regret of unspoken words.

“Shinji is still in Chinatown, though,” Miyuki said, her finger hovering over the laptop screen as she pointed out key landmarks.

“Look here...” she pointed to the spot that the GPS co-ordinates intersected. “Nankinmachi Square.” She focused intently, her thoughts swirling as she recalled Shinji’s favourite spots.

“He’s always loved Nankinmachi Square. And he loves the harbour. He also likes the finer things in life.”

“Are you suggesting he might be in a fancy hotel in Chinatown?” Sayuri sought clarification, her heart racing at the possibility.

“Yes, I am. And this hotel, right here, has a great view of the harbour,” Miyuki said, excitement creeping into her voice as she pointed to the Hotel Crown Palais Kobe on the screen.

“Hotel Crown Palais,” Sayuri read aloud, feeling a spark of hope. “It’s just over a kilometre from here,” she said excitedly.

“Do you have something?” Takuya shouted across the room, where the men were discussing their strategy.

“I have a feeling he is in the Hotel Crown Palais,” Miyuki responded, her tone now more confident. “It’s only an educated guess, but it’s a starting point.”

“OK. Let me get hold of Kenichi and tell him to focus his men on that area,” Ken said, his voice steady as he pulled out his phone, determination etched on his face.

As Ken dialled, Sayuri exchanged a glance with Miyuki. This could be the breakthrough they needed. The thought of Naomi being so close, possibly just a few blocks away, sent adrenaline coursing through her veins. They were finally making progress, and for the first time in what felt like ages, hope flickered brightly in the room.

“Sayuri, why don’t you phone Naomi’s phone again,” suggested Ken. “Let’s make sure she is still safe.”

“That’s all I have been thinking about since I arrived in Japan,” she confessed. “But I’m too terrified. Living with the hope that someone is still alive is easier than knowing they are dead,” she explained.

“I understand, Sayuri-chan, but I think it is for the best,” said Ken sympathetically.

Sayuri's hands trembled as she dialled Naomi's number again, her heart pounding. The phone rang, and the room grew silent, everyone listening intently.

“The number you have dialled is not available on this network”, came the cold, impersonal voice message. Sayuri felt her insides drop, a chill spreading through her as panic surged within her chest. There was no way to reach her daughter. She looked around at the worried faces of her team, each mirroring her own dread.

“Right! No time to waste!” Ken suddenly declared, his voice cutting through the tension like a knife. “Let’s go to the Crown Palais immediately!”

Despite being only one kilometre away from their hotel, they decided that driving would still be quicker. They hurried to the cars Kenichi had provided for their stay in Kobe, adrenaline fuelling their urgency. As they sped toward the hotel, Ken made a quick phone call to Satoshi, his liaison with the Kobe clan of the Yamaguchi-gumi. The sound of the ringing filled the car until Satoshi picked up.

“Satoshi, it’s Ken. Have you spoken to hotel reception yet?”

As Ken continued speaking, the tension in the car was palpable, each word amplifying the urgency of their mission and the precariousness of Naomi’s situation.

“Uh-huh, uh-huh, as Ken wrote something down on his pocket notebook, he always carried in his suit pocket.

“Satoshi and his men have been to speak to reception,” Ken relayed, as he ended the brief call. “There is nobody registered under Shinji Matsumoto. However, there is a guy with a limp who checked in with a younger girl yesterday.”

“What name did he use to check in with?” Miyuki asked hurriedly, her eyes wide with concern.

“Masahiko Sakamoto,” Ken replied.

Miyuki’s expression shifted as she processed the name. After a few thoughtful seconds, she exclaimed, “Yes, that’s him! He’s combined two of his pop idols’ names together—Kyu Sakamoto and Masahiko Kondo!”

The revelation hung in the air, a mix of excitement and urgency. They were getting closer, but with every passing moment, Sayuri felt the weight of fear for Naomi increasing. Time was running out.

The two cars pulled up to the sleek façade of the Crown Palais Hotel, the sunlight glinting off its glass windows. As Sayuri, Ken, Takuya, Miyuki, and the three henchmen stepped out, an air of determination surrounded them. The urgency of their mission loomed large, and they moved purposefully toward the entrance.

Inside, the lobby was polished and elegant, but the mood was tense as they approached the reception desk. Ken leaned forward, his imposing presence demanding attention. “Konnichiwa. Which room is Masahiko Sakamoto in?” he asked, his voice steady but urgent.

The female receptionist looked alarmed, her eyes darting between the five tough-looking men before her. “Sumimasen, company policy does not allow me to give guests’ room numbers to anyone,” she stammered nervously, her hands trembling slightly.

Miyuki stepped up, her demeanour shifting from concern to confidence. “I’m family,” she said smoothly. “He’s my brother. These are my business associates. We are here to negotiate a deal.” Her voice was convincing, a practiced calm that cut through the tension. The receptionist’s expression softened, relief washing over her as she nodded.

“OK, family is allowed,” she said, reassured that she had followed protocol and avoided any potential drama. “Let me check... He’s in room 504.”

As the group exchanged glances, a renewed sense of purpose ignited within them. They were one step closer to finding Naomi, and now they had a room number to guide them. Ken led the group toward the elevators, his expression a mask of determination. Sayuri walked closely behind, her mind filled with dread. Would they be too late? What if Shinji had done something awful to her precious daughter?

As the elevator doors slid closed, Takuya glanced at Miyuki, who was visibly tense but resolute.

“Are you ready for this?” he asked quietly.

“I have to be,” she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. The thought of confronting her brother unsettled her, but she couldn’t let that stop her. Naomi needed her.

The elevator chimed as they reached the fifth floor, and the doors opened to a long, quiet corridor. Ken took the lead again, marching toward room 504, each step echoing in the stillness. The group fell into a tight formation behind him, the weight of their mission palpable in the air.

As they stood outside room 504, a palpable tension filled the air. Ken leaned close to Miyuki, whispering urgently, “You knock and announce your presence. He needs to hear it’s you.”

Miyuki nodded, taking a deep breath to steady her nerves. She stepped forward and rapped her knuckles against the door. “Shinji, it’s me, Miyuki! Your sister! We need to talk!”

Almost immediately, the door swung open, startling them. They stared in shock at the imposing figure filling the doorway, exuding an air of casual confidence.

His familiar face, a beacon of hope amidst the chaos, caught her off guard. Without thinking, she impulsively stepped forward and enveloped him in a tight embrace, relief flooding through her as she clung to him. In that brief moment, the terror of her daughter’s captivity faded, replaced by the warmth of connection.

“Konnichiwa!” he said cheerfully, “Minna wa genki desu ka?”

“Richard! I’m so glad you are here!”

EPILOGUE

Sayuri and Naomi sat side by side on the plush sofa in Ken's VIP suite, a cocoon of warmth and relief enveloping them. Naomi, freshly rescued by Richard earlier that day, was animatedly recounting her experiences, her nervous energy pouring out in a rapid stream of words.

"I enrolled as a student for the KGU University Faculty of Global Communication—English Course—because I enjoyed studying English in Cebu so much that I decided to do a more intense program!" she exclaimed, her eyes bright with excitement. "I'm so proud of my mother, you know? She taught herself English. It inspired me to be more like her—a woman of the world!"

The room was filled with a palpable sense of joy as everyone listened intently, delighted to see Naomi safe and reunited with Sayuri. Ken, Takuya, and Miyuki exchanged relieved glances, while Richard, seated comfortably in an armchair beside the sofa, leaned in slightly.

"Yes, your mother is very inspiring," he agreed, his voice warm. "She inspired me to start learning Japanese." He reached across and squeezed Sayuri's hand, a gesture of solidarity and support that made her smile.

Sayuri had already confided in Richard on the way to the hotel about the trauma she had endured—about being raped by Shinji—and she sensed that he had pieced together the truth long before she had spoken it. But sharing her story had been a necessary step, a way to reclaim her voice and confront the past that had haunted her for so long.

Now, as Naomi recounted her experiences, Sayuri's mind drifted back to that painful revelation. She had felt exposed, vulnerable, but also strangely liberated. Richard had listened intently, his expression one of understanding and support. He hadn't flinched or judged; instead, he had offered her a safe space to share her truth. As Naomi continued to share her story, the atmosphere lightened, a stark contrast to the tension that had hung over them just hours before.

They all knew that Shinji—that complicated figure—had not been handed over to the police. Instead, Richard had given him to Ken, who had ordered his henchmen to put Shinji under guard at the Yakuza compound in Kobe. He would be dealt with later. Ken had promised Sayuri that Shinji "would pay" for his sins. She believed him. Ken was no friend of Shinji's and she knew that, despite their dramatic past, he still cared deeply for her. Shinji was toast.

But right now, the focus was on Naomi, her laughter and excitement filling the room as she spoke about her classes, her newfound friends, and her dreams for the future. Sayuri felt her heart swell with pride and relief, grateful for this moment of normalcy and connection after the chaos they had just endured.

"I was busy unpacking in my new dorm at KGU when I was invited to the Fresher's Reception that evening – it's basically a party for the newbies," Naomi explained. "It was fun. I met a cute guy from Meguro City. We chatted and I mentioned

that my mother was from Meguro City. He said his dad might know my mom, so I told him mom's name," Naomi said, giving her mother an apologetic look.

"That must be your brother, Naoki," Miyuki interjected. "My nephew. He goes to KGU," she continued.

The atmosphere in Ken's hotel suite was charged with curiosity as everyone leaned in closer to hear Naomi's story. She took a deep breath, her excitement tempered by the seriousness of what she was saying.

"I have a brother?" she looked at her mom, shocked by what she had just heard.

"Naomi," Sayuri began, her voice steady but filled with emotion. "There's something important I need to tell you. Shinji... he's your father."

Naomi's eyes widened in disbelief. "I know, Mom. I heard him talking to you on the phone. It was a big shock, but I've had time to process it. He's just - excuse the expression - a sperm donor. He never played any part in my life, so I don't feel anything for him. To me, he's just the lunatic monster that kidnapped me. So, don't worry Mom. I will be fine. *Gaman*."

"That is good to hear my child. I have been fretting about how all of this drama would affect you, but it is not something I want to talk about right now," Sayuri spoke softly. "Sometime soon, OK? When we're alone," she told her daughter, a pained smile on her face.

"Hai!" said Naomi obediently.

"Anyway dear, continue with your story," Sayuri urged gently.

"Yeah, he, I mean Naoki, was so friendly," Naomi said, a hint of nostalgia in her voice. "We hit it off right away. We talked about everything—school, our backgrounds. It was cool," Naomi continued.

The room was silent, everyone hanging onto her words. Naomi settled deeper into the sofa, her excitement spilling over as she recounted her memories.

"The party was on a Friday night," she began, her eyes sparkling with nostalgia. "Naoki said he would show me around Kobe the next day because I was new in town. We agreed to go to the mall together on Saturday."

As she spoke, the room seemed to transform, the tension of recent events melting away into the warmth of her story. "We did some shopping at *umie* and then he got a text on his phone. It was from his father. Apparently, they often met for lunch on the weekends. He told me that he was going to meet his dad for lunch and asked if I wanted to join. I said yes."

Ken, Takuya, and Richard listened intently, their expressions a mix of curiosity and concern. Sayuri watched Naomi, her heart swelling with pride for her daughter's adventurous spirit.

"Naoki chose a place near Chinatown because he said his father loved it there," Naomi continued, her voice animated. "We arrived at an open-air café in Nankinmachi

Square before his dad did. It was so colourful and lively, with all the lanterns and food stalls. I was amazed!”

Naomi paused for a moment, recalling the vibrant atmosphere. “His dad joined us a few minutes later. We ordered food and drinks, and Naoki started telling his dad about the party the night before, which reminded him to ask his father if he knew my mom.”

She looked at Sayuri lovingly, a smile on her face. “I remember feeling so happy and carefree, just enjoying the moment.”

Sayuri squeezed Naomi’s hand in response, her heart aching with the bittersweetness of the memory. “You were so brave to step out and meet new people,” she said softly. “I’m proud of you.”

Naomi beamed at her mother, the bond between them strengthening in that shared moment.

“But then things got weird,” she added, her expression shifting slightly. “When I mentioned your name, Naoki’s dad seemed really interested and I could tell he was thinking hard about something.”

“Did he say anything about your mom?” Ken asked, his curiosity piqued.

“No, not then,” Naomi replied, shaking her head. “But I could feel a change in the atmosphere. It was like something clicked for him, but I didn’t understand it at the time.”

The room fell silent for a moment, everyone contemplating the significance of those fleeting interactions. Sayuri’s mind raced, reflecting on how fate had intertwined their lives without anyone realizing it. Naomi took a deep breath, her voice steady as she continued recounting the events that had led to her kidnapping.

“Then, after the meal, we walked around the area, and they showed me all the places of interest. It was so vibrant! I was loving every moment.” Her eyes sparkled with the memory, but a shadow passed over her expression as she moved on.

“While I was busy inside a women’s clothing shop, they said they were going to walk down the alleyway to smoke since it was forbidden outside the shop. I paid no attention at the time,” she said, shaking her head slightly as if trying to shake off the recollection. “But when I exited the shop, only Naoki’s dad was there.”

Sayuri leaned closer, her heart racing as she sensed the shift in the story. “What happened next?”

“I asked him where Naoki had gone, and he said that as a special treat, he had booked a hotel room for Naoki to sleep that night because he was always complaining about how noisy the dorm was on Saturday nights.” Naomi frowned; the innocence of her earlier excitement now replaced by a dawning realization of the danger she had been in.

“Of course, I didn’t know anything about that. It was my first weekend at KGU.”

Richard’s brow furrowed. “And you believed him? You didn’t think it was strange?”

Naomi shrugged, her face tightening with the memory. “At the time, I thought it was sweet. I mean, I had just met them both. I didn’t think much of it.” Naomi continued her story, her expression shifting from nostalgia to unease.

“He said that Naoki had gone to the hotel room to put his shopping away because he wanted to take me to a movie and didn’t want to carry shopping bags with him. Then he suggested that we both walk to the hotel, which was just a short distance away. He said he was in a hurry to leave and would just say goodbye to his son, leaving Naoki and me to entertain ourselves.”

As she spoke, Sayuri felt a rush of frustration. She bit her tongue, fighting the urge to scream at her daughter for being so gullible. But then, as if a mirror had been held up to her past, she remembered her own youthful naivety. *Was it better to be wary of people? Or was it better to trust them?* This internal struggle had haunted Sayuri for years, and now it resurfaced with a vengeance.

“So, you went with him to the hotel,” Takuya said, the statement feeling more like a rhetorical question than an inquiry.

“Hai!” Naomi replied, her enthusiasm still evident, oblivious to the alarm bells ringing in the room.

Sayuri’s heart raced as she processed the implications. “Naomi, you have to understand—”

“I know, I know!” Naomi interrupted, her voice rising slightly. “I’m young and naïve. I didn’t think anything of it! I was just excited to be in a new place.”

Ken leaned forward; his expression serious. “But you didn’t think to question it at all? This man was a stranger.”

Naomi looked defensive. “I was just trying to enjoy my time! I never imagined anything would go wrong. I thought I could trust him because he was Naoki’s dad.”

Richard interjected gently. “That’s the thing about trusting others. It can be difficult to gauge who’s safe and who’s not, especially when you’re new to a place.” Sayuri nodded, her heart swelling with empathy for her daughter.

“Summimasen! It’s not your fault, Naomi. You were just trying to make friends and have fun. But sometimes, people can take advantage of that innocence. I’m just relieved that you are safe,” Sayuri said softly, giving her daughter a look of love.

Naomi looked down, her earlier excitement dimming. “I didn’t realize I was walking into danger until it was too late.”

“Exactly,” Ken said, his voice firm yet compassionate. “That’s why it’s crucial to be cautious, even when it feels uncomfortable. It’s a hard lesson, but it’s one we all learn eventually.”

Naomi took a moment to absorb their words, her youthful innocence clashing with the harsh reality of her experience. “I get it now,” she said softly. “I really do. I just wish I had seen the signs.”

Sayuri could see that Ken was about to continue his lecture and she glared at him so forcefully that he closed his already-open mouth and gave her an almost imperceptible nod, acknowledging her silent admonition.

Sayuri reached out, wrapping her arm around Naomi's shoulders, pulling her close. "You did what you could. What matters now is that you're safe, and we're here to support you."

"I have a question," Ken asked.

"Yes?" encouraged Naomi.

"Why didn't you scream for help when you were in the hotel room?"

"I was scared," Naomi admitted. The room had a sliding door with a verandah and he said that if I scream, I will become 'just another suicide statistic,'" Naomi said, shivering involuntarily.

"Yes, that is scary," Ken agreed. Then he turned to Richard. "So, you are the guy that Sayuri was living with in Thailand," he stated. It wasn't a question.

"Hai!" Richard said, trying to keep the mood light.

"Ex-military, I'm guessing," continued Ken, with respect.

Richard leaned back in his chair, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Yes. I was a pathfinder for the parabats when I was younger," he mentioned casually, his tone nonchalant but with an underlying weight. "But I don't really like to talk about it."

Ken nodded, respecting Richard's boundaries. "That's fair. Everyone has their pasts, I suppose. But how did you find Shinji?"

Richard shifted slightly, his gaze drifting to the window, then back to Ken.

"Sayuri told me that Naomi was missing, but she refused my help. Knowing how stubborn she is, I just hopped on a plane to Tokyo and waited for more intel. No point in adding stress to the situation." He smiled knowingly at Sayuri, who sat nearby, her expression warm and appreciative.

"Thank you for that," Sayuri replied softly, her heart swelling with gratitude.

Richard continued, "And then when she sent me the geolocation from Naomi's phone trace, I came straight here from Tokyo. Nice trains in Japan, by the way," he chuckled, the lightness of his tone contrasting with the seriousness of their conversation.

Ken raised an eyebrow, genuinely intrigued. "You really didn't waste any time, did you? How did you know where to look?"

"Once I had the name Shinji Matsumoto, it was easy. My best friend, Mack, in South Africa is an expert hacker and comms expert. He managed to plant a tracker virus in Shinji's phone. After that, it was easy peasy."

Ken nodded, impressed by Richard's determination.

“That’s admirable. Not everyone would drop everything to follow someone halfway across the world.”

Richard shrugged, a hint of modesty in his demeanour.

“I just knew how much was at stake. Sayuri and Naomi are family, and family looks out for each other. Besides, I think I might have feelings for her,” he said, chuckling in embarrassment for being such a softy.

Sayuri smiled at him, her heart full. The bond between them felt stronger in that moment, woven together by shared experiences and mutual respect.

“So, what’s it like being a pathfinder?” Ken asked, his curiosity piqued but still respectful of Richard’s reluctance to delve too deep.

“Nope, not going there,” he replied emphatically. “But it did teach me some valuable skills and to trust my instincts, which has served me well in other areas of my life.”

“Sounds intense,” Ken replied, nodding. “But I can see how that would translate into being a good protector.”

Richard met Ken’s gaze; his expression serious for a moment. “It’s all about being prepared for the unexpected and doing your best to keep everyone safe.”

The two men shared a moment of understanding, a silent agreement forged in the recognition of their roles as protectors. In the midst of the emotional turmoil, it felt good to connect, to share stories of resilience and commitment.

Sayuri glanced at the two men, a playful smile dancing on her lips.

“Enough of the bromance,” she teased, her voice light and filled with warmth as she gave Ken a warm look, “Richard is mine.”

She turned to Richard, her heart swelling with affection, knowing in that moment that she had found a partner for the journey ahead—someone who would stand by her side through every challenge and joy.

As they shared stories and laughter, the warmth of camaraderie enveloped them like a comforting embrace. In that moment, they understood the power of Gaman—enduring hardship with patience and dignity.

They also recognized that true healing comes through forgiveness, allowing them to move forward together, lighter and stronger than before.

THE END

Glossary

gaman = perseverance/ patience/ endurance

dasai = hideous

randoseru = Japanese school bag

koinu - puppy

omikuji = a slip of paper with a written fortune (fortune cookie without the cookie)

konbanwa = good evening (salutation)

okaasan = mother (respectful term)

sumimasen = sorry/ excuse me/ I apologize

tsuma = wife

chan = when added to a name denotes affection/ friendship

danna = affectionate term for husband

san = when added to a name denotes respect/ formality

ne-chan - informal way to address an older sister

panya = bakery

arigato = thank you

konichiwa = hello

Fuji San = Mount Fuji

boroboro - worn out

ohayo = morning/ hi

josei kocho = headmistress

hai = yes

Arigatou gozaimasu = thank you very much

tanto kyōshi = homeroom teacher

baka = idiot

jaa ne = goodbye/ see you

nimono = broth/ soup

ikigai = purpose/ reason for living

kotatsu table = is a traditional Japanese heating table that combines a low table with a heat source.

Oba-san = a Japanese term that translates to "aunt"

Oji-san = a Japanese term that translates to "uncle"

Michiko Shōda - was a commoner who married the emperor

Akihito = emperor of Japan

Ki o tsukete = take care (as in goodbye)

kawaii = cute

Purikura = a popular Japanese photo booth experience that allows users to take and customize photographs.

Dorayaki = a popular Japanese confection consisting of two fluffy, pancake-like cakes filled with sweet red bean paste, known as "anko."

shikibuton = a traditional Japanese futon mattress used for sleeping.

makura = a traditional Japanese pillow, often used in conjunction with a shikibuton.

kacho - section chief

bucho - office boss

Koko ni tsukimashita = translates to "I have arrived here" in English.

tamagoyaki = a Japanese rolled omelette

Yamato Nadeshiko = the idealized image of a traditional Japanese woman, embodying virtues such as grace, elegance, and modesty.

shatei = a member of the lower ranks of yakuza

desu = it is

namagashi = a type of traditional Japanese confectionery

Yubitsume - a yakuza ritual where a member has to cut off a fingertip to show their loyalty to their yakuza clan.

juku - a type of private tutoring school or cram school in Japan.

deba = a traditional Japanese kitchen knife primarily used for breaking down fish and cutting through small bones.

kobun = typically refers to a subordinate or an apprentice within the yakuza organization.

ninensei = second year of high school (sophomore).

izakaya = traditional Japanese bar

takoyaki = is a popular Japanese street food that consists of small, round ball.

ramenya = ramen shop

Natsu Matsuri = refers to summer festivals in Japan.

yukata = is a traditional Japanese garment, similar to a kimono but typically made from lighter fabric, making it ideal for summer wear.

Khun xyak ca nang thihin (Thai) - translates to "Where would you like to sit?" in English.

Song Chang kwart yai (Thai) - "Two big Chang beers please."

Kanpai! = Cheers!

neko = cat

Oishi = tasty

hachigatsu = August

Tanabata Festival = a traditional Japanese festival celebrated on July 7th. It commemorates the meeting of two stars, Orihime (Vega) and Hikoboshi (Altair), who are separated by the Milky Way and allowed to meet only once a year.

tenugui = is a traditional Japanese hand towel made from cotton.

kanzashi = are traditional Japanese hair ornaments that are often used in various styles of Japanese hairstyles, particularly with kimono.

yokoso = welcome

KMT = The KMT was founded in 1912 by Sun Yat-sen, aiming to create a unified and modern Chinese state. The KMT's power was challenged by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), leading to a protracted civil war. Initially, the KMT and CCP cooperated against warlords and foreign imperialism, but tensions eventually led to conflict.

CCP = Chinese Communist Party.

aishiteru = is a Japanese phrase that means "I love you."

chikatetsu = subway

make inu = loser dog

hikikomori = a Japanese term that refers to a phenomenon where individuals withdraw from social life and seek extreme isolation.

chugakku = middle school

kuso = crap/shit (expletive).

futoko = is a Japanese term that refers to students who refuse to attend school or have significant absences from school, often due to various psychological, social, or emotional issues.

Otosama - a Japanese term that translates to "father" or "dad" in English. It is a respectful and formal way to refer to one's father.

higaisha = In Japan, single unwed mothers are often referred to as "higaisha", which translates to "victim".

shinju = in the context of yakuza, it means he is no longer able to be protected by the yakuza. He is a target.

Minna wa genki desu ka?" = How is everyone?

umie = a shopping mall in Kobe Chinatown.